

Peer Attitudes Towards Students With Exceptionalities in the Classroom

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Abstract

This concurrent triangulation mixed methods research project sought to investigate inconsistencies in the current literature regarding student attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities. The study encompassed 27 student participants across primary, junior, and intermediate divisions in a Southwestern Ontario school who were involved in classroom discussions, questionnaires, and individual interviews with the goal of identifying elementary school-aged students' attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities in the classroom. Using an appreciative inquiry lens, data collection prompted students to recall positive memories they may have shared with peers who have exceptionalities. An emergent thematic analysis and triangulation of multiple data sources revealed that students acknowledge differences between students with exceptionalities and other same-aged peers; however, students consistently communicated their intent to support all students within their classrooms. While study findings also indicated that students demonstrated an understanding of the importance of inclusion, further research is needed regarding their actual behaviour.

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Dedication

To Elizabeth and Dante, without whom I would have never chosen education.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background and Statement of the Problem	2
Purpose of the Study.....	3
Research Questions	4
Importance of the Study	4
Researcher Position	5
Theoretical Framework	6
Strengths, Risks, and Limitations of the Study	11
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
Inclusion Movements Throughout History	14
Ontario and Special Education	18
The Social Model of Disability	19
Attitudes Towards Exceptionalities	21
Inclusive Classroom Settings	28
Conclusion	33
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	35
Site and Participant Selection.....	35
Instruments	37
Quantitative Classroom Procedures for Data Collection.....	44
Qualitative Classroom Procedures for Data Collection.....	45
Data Analysis.....	46
Establishing Credibility	49
Ethical Considerations.....	50
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	53
Quantitative Data (Classroom Questionnaires)	53
Qualitative Data (Classroom Discussions and Individual Interviews).....	62
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	76
Connections to Framework.....	77
Implications	78
Future Directions	82
Conclusion.....	83

References	85
Appendix A: Brock Research Ethics Board Approval	94
Appendix B: Informal Teacher Invitation Letter	95
Appendix C: Formal Teacher Invitation Letter	96
Appendix D: Parent Invitation Letter	98
Appendix E: Parent Consent Form	100
Appendix F: Student Assent Forms	104
Appendix G: Mini Lesson.....	108
Appendix H: Sample Verbal Script	110
Appendix I: Questionnaire	111
Appendix J: Questionnaire Development Resources.....	113
Appendix K: Interview Protocol	116

List of Tables

Table	Page
1. Number of Participants per Study Component	38
2. Participants Organized by Gender and Division.....	54
3. Affective Dimension.....	55
4. Cognitive Dimension	58
5. Behaviour Dimension	60

List of Figures

Figure	Page
1. Visual representation of the theoretical and methodological framework for the research study	7
2. Students reporting frustration	56
3. Student beliefs regarding similarities.....	59
4. Students reporting whether they would allow a child with an exceptionality to work or play with them.....	61
5. Students reporting potential discomfort sitting near a peer with an exceptionality.....	63

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There is a shifting trend in education today toward inclusive classroom settings (Hodkinson, 2007; Tkachyk, 2013). These classrooms have been constructed with the purpose of accepting difference and creating environments that educate all students with varying needs in the same context (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013). By learning to accept and embrace students of all abilities, strengths and characteristics, these inclusive attitudes have the potential to be reproduced within society, creating a more understanding and equitable community that fosters growth and opportunity for all members (Hodkinson, 2007). Furthermore, the implementation of inclusive classrooms fosters a multitude of benefits for students who have exceptionalities including improved educational experiences, increased opportunities for participation, and enhanced social skills (Hodkinson, 2007).

However, despite these benefits, recent research suggests that a number of drawbacks may exist for students both with and without exceptionalities in the classroom (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Cameron, 2014; Litvak, Ritchie, & Shore, 2011; Smith-D'Arezo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). It has been recognized that students who have exceptionalities often experience peer rejection, become stressed in high pressured academic environments, and exhibit behavioural outbursts in their inclusive classroom settings (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Cameron, 2014; De Silva, 2013; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Furthermore, students who do not have exceptionalities have expressed frustration, annoyance, and boredom in inclusive classrooms (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Cameron, 2014; Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013). For example, in Cairns and

McClatchey's (2013) study, students commented multiple times on the distracting behaviour that their peers with exceptionalities displayed, stating that they were often "too hyper" or "too loud." Such feelings of frustration and annoyance with their peers ultimately have the potential to impact their overall attitudes towards those with exceptionalities and can negatively impact their classroom environment. It is therefore essential to further investigate student attitudes towards their peers with exceptionalities in the classroom.

Background and Statement of the Problem

Children who have exceptionalities are often the targets of bullying and negative peer attitudes at school (Hodkinson, 2007; MacMillan, Tarrant, Abraham, & Morris, 2014). Despite an increase in inclusive classroom settings, it is not uncommon for these students to also be both physically and emotionally isolated from their same-age peers (Smith-D'Arezo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Many students with exceptionalities report peer victimization throughout their schooling experience (Son, Parish, & Peterson, 2012). Experiencing negative attitudes and peer victimization can lead to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem (MacMillan et al., 2014) and there is conflicting research in regards to whether inclusive settings ultimately reduce or increase these negative attitudes (Hodkinson, 2007; Litvak et al., 2011; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010).

Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas (2010) suggest that inclusion alone does not improve children's chances of becoming fully accepted by their peers. Furthermore, in Litvak et al.'s (2011) study, results indicated that some junior students were concerned that interacting with their peers who had exceptionalities would lead to them being bullied. Additionally, Hodkinson's (2007) research yielded inconclusive results

suggesting that inclusion has the potential to foster negative attitudes such as frustration or annoyance. However, in direct contrast, MacMillan et al. (2014) found throughout their extensive meta-analysis of research involving children's contact with individuals who have disabilities that the increased interaction within inclusive classroom had the potential to break down barriers and reduce negative attitudes, even suggesting that inclusion elicits empathetic emotions and reduces anxiety-related symptoms in all students.

This research is ultimately preceded and inspired by the researcher's personal experiences:

Within my own experience in an inclusive grade 4 classroom, I initially became fascinated by the variance of attitudes that students held towards their peers with exceptionalities. At the time, the classroom I was teaching in had five students with exceptionalities including intellectual disabilities, oppositional defiance disorder, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Many students empathized with the needs of these students often offering help or friendship when their peers were experiencing difficulty, however similar to Cameron's (2014) research, I also witnessed frustration and annoyance at student outbursts. (Personal reflection, October 2015).

Therefore, the aim of this research is to further investigate the attitudes that students in inclusive classrooms hold towards their peers with exceptionalities in order to provide additional clarification and insight to the current inconsistency in research.

Purpose of the Study

With society's current stress on inclusivity, it is essential to explore the attitudes

that children may hold within their classroom towards their peers. Cairns and McClatchey (2013) suggested that children with exceptionalities are often the target of negative attitudes in the classroom. In considering the impact and persistence of attitudes as discussed by Hodkinson (2007), it is therefore important to investigate these attitudes to understand their effects. The purpose of this research is to explore children's attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities within inclusive classrooms.

Research Questions

The main question guiding this study is "What attitudes do elementary school-aged students hold towards their peers who have exceptionalities in the classroom?" The researcher ultimately hopes to use this question to explore trends in student responses that will help provide a better understanding of student attitudes and peer relationships within the classroom. Sub-questions include, "What unique differences emerge (if any) between divisions through overall quantitative questioning?" and "What common or divergent rationale(s) do students share for their attitudes during qualitative interviewing?"

Importance of the Study

The intention of conducting this research was to positively impact both social and educational research fields. Results from this study can be used to increase understanding of the peer attitudes that exist towards students with exceptionalities in the classroom. These results may indicate that peer attitudes are generally negative, similar to the conclusions drawn from Smith-D'Arezzo and Moore-Thomas's (2010) research with junior students and therefore underscore a need to develop strategies to increase peer empathy and understanding. However, the research may also indicate that students accept their peers with exceptionalities at which point the factors that promote and sustain this

change may be explored. This study is ultimately important because of the way attitudes are replicated within society and societal contexts (Hodkinson, 2007). In recognizing the importance of fostering an inclusive society, the implications of this study will assist in locating how students represent these ideals and what steps may be necessary in the future to continue fostering inclusivity. Ultimately, inclusion is a current reality of today's classroom systems and therefore it is of interest to explore how student attitudes are represented within this setting.

Researcher Position

In addition to acknowledging the contribution and importance of this research, it is also essential to consider the influences and personal history of the researcher to understand the lens through which the research is constructed and interpreted:

Although this research was completed within a different school board in Southern Ontario, my own experience has been within the District School Board of Niagara (DSBN). I was a student within the DSBN and now continue to work within the DSBN as an Occasional Teacher. From my own personal experiences as a student, I recall segregated classrooms within my schools; I do not personally remember interacting with students who had exceptionalities as part of my education. Current DSBN documentation however, indicates that all students should have opportunities for success and will be accommodated and supported to achieve inclusion and full participation (DSBN, 2015). Furthermore, students who have exceptionalities are recognized as having strength and value within the education system and the DSBN specifically

reports a commitment to ensuring success, appreciating learning differences, and recognizing the contributions of all students (DSBN, 2015).

In addition to my experiences within the DSBN, my work experience as an integration supervisor exposed me to the necessity of finding new ways to support children with exceptionalities. I spent 8 years working directly with children who have exceptionalities in social camp settings and gained an immense amount of knowledge regarding inclusion and peer attitudes towards children with exceptionalities.

My experiences within these two unique places of employment have given me the opportunity to learn about various policies, attitudes, practices, and views regarding children with exceptionalities and it is essential to acknowledge this as I enter another school board. (Personal reflection, February 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed through two distinct sociological frameworks: The Social Model of Disability (Davis, 1997) and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969). (See Figure 1.) These theories helped guide the way in which the researcher viewed and constructed the study. Using elements from both theories in conjunction with the understanding that school is an important site of attitudinal reproduction, as it allows the researcher to explore the research question through two suggested methodological frameworks.

Ultimately, the research is functional through the structural elements of Creswell's (2013) interpretation of a concurrent triangulation approach with characteristics of appreciative inquiry as described by Hennessy and Hughes (2014).

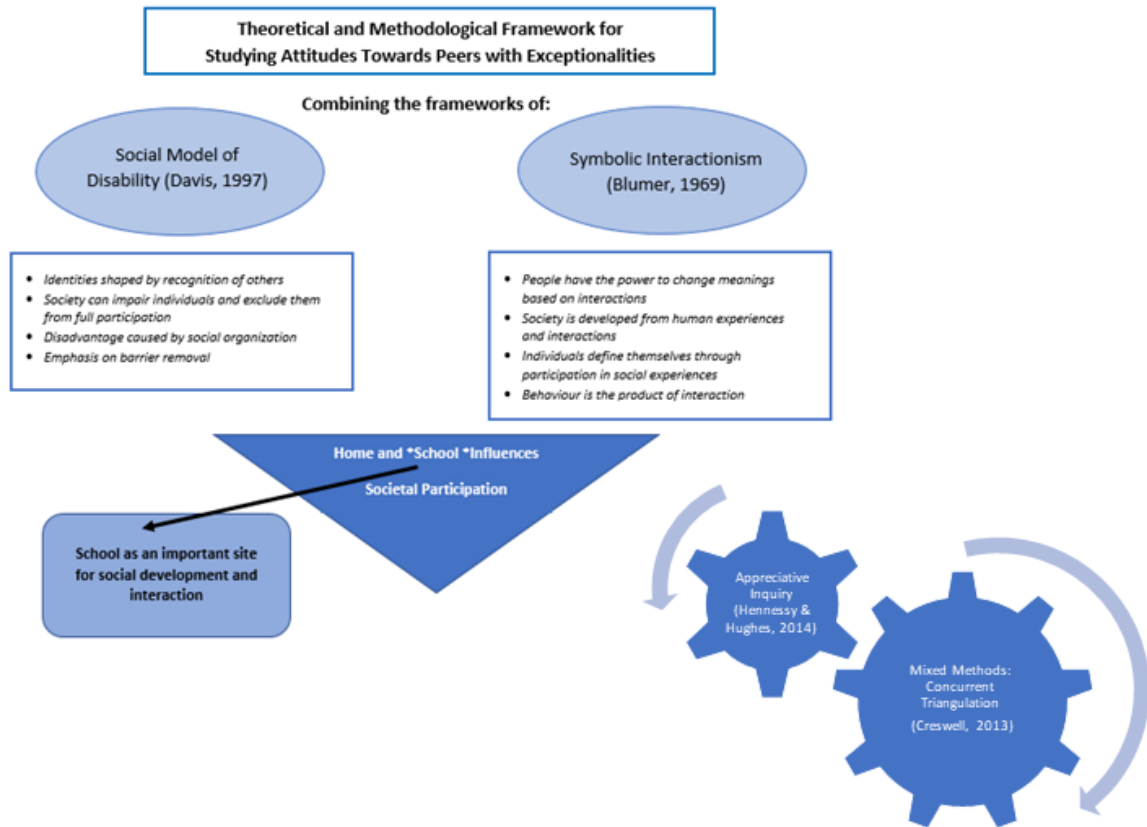


Figure 1. Visual representation of the theoretical and methodological framework for the research study.

Social Model of Disability

When examining peer attitudes, it is essential to consider the potential impact these attitudes may have on children with exceptionalities in educational and social settings. Attitudes and stigma are interconnected in today's society which can mean that when individuals with exceptionalities are labeled or perceived negatively, they often experience discrimination as a result of these perceptions (Scior, Addai-Davis, Kenyon, & Sheridan, 2013). Although attitudinal development generally begins within the home (Hodkinson, 2007), school can act as a site of permanent stigmatization as children spend an excessive amount of time within this context. The Social Model of Disability is discussed in further detail within the following literature review. The most essential component of the framework relative to this study is the concept of examining the attitudes that currently exist within the classroom to understand if these attitudes are reflective of the suggested perpetual negative stigmatization within current educational practice and ultimately if children are likely to continually be exposed to this stigma throughout their lives.

Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer (1969) recognized the impact that societal influences have on individuals, and proposed that individuals cannot be separated from the context in which they exist. From a Symbolic Interactionist standpoint, this means that children will inevitably be impacted by the actions, attitudes, and experiences of those around them. Blumer further proposed that children create meaning as a result of surrounding interactions and attitudes. In an educational setting, if a child with an exceptionality experiences negative attitudes and internalizes the views held by others, it is likely that these attitudes will

transfer into other areas of his or her life. For example, students who experience feelings of social isolation may suffer academically as they might avoid asking for help, speaking out loud, or working with peer groups. In the future, students who have experienced this type of isolation may not participate in other social activities such as sports or extracurricular activities. Cairns and McClatchey (2013) explained that this exclusion often leads to a negative social impact for the child. Similar to the Social Model of Disability, the Symbolic Interactionist framework recognizes the perpetuation of societal views over time and within the individual (Handberg, Thorne, Mitgaard, Vinther Nielsen, & Lomborg, 2014). For this reason, Handberg et al. (2014) recommended Symbolic Interactionism as a guiding theoretical framework to support educational research explaining that the theory works well with many other social frameworks. This theoretical perspective specifically will assist in guiding the research as it acknowledges the importance of understanding ongoing societal attitudes.

Mixed Methods

In order to fully understand these attitudes, the research has been guided by a mixed methods approach which Creswell (2015) suggested provides a comprehensive examination of data and trends. The success of the mixed methods approach is often determined by a clear division of both qualitative and quantitative components (Creswell, 2015). Creswell (2003) described six unique prototype designs for completing mixed methods research. The research has been conducted in accordance with Creswell's *concurrent triangulation* design which is characterized by a separate analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data initially, followed by a comparison of both data sets to

cross-validate or substantiate results and findings. Data was therefore merged during the interpretation and analysis phase of research.

The major component of this research was the collection of multiple sources of data that supported the researcher in identifying emergent themes relative to this specific classroom site. Multiple data sources were used as complementary information to bring depth to the current study (Creswell, 2014).

The quantitative component of the research consists of Likert-scale surveys with the goal of providing an overview of the attitudes and opinions held by students (Creswell, 2013). The surveys were conducted within a short time period and are controlled to allow for simple comparison (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative information was systematically gathered through open ended interview questions and discussion to gain additional insight from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The questions used within the interview were created using an appreciative inquiry approach with a focus on the positive interactions which already exist and how these interactions can be potentially improved or maintained for all students (Hennessy & Hughes, 2014). Open codes were used to find major categories of attitudes towards peers with exceptionalities to supplement the quantitative findings. Selective coding was then be applied to assist in identifying the major areas of focus (Creswell, 2013).

Appreciative Inquiry

The role of appreciative inquiry (AI) in this research project has specifically been within the content of the survey and interview questions. Hennessy and Hughes (2014) explain that a key component of AI is to avoid problem-based questioning and

additionally to focus on what may already be working. The majority of the questions therefore are strategically written with a positive connotation prompting students to recall positive experiences or share insight into their inclusive classroom settings. Finally, despite the positive focus, Hennessey and Hughes also explain that researchers using an AI approach do not neglect or ignore a potential need for change. This element is specifically important within the research as students were given the opportunity to share any contradicting views or negative experiences they may have had.

Ultimately, by examining the research with reference to both the Social Model of Disability and Social Interactionist frameworks, the necessity of exploring current attitudes is emphasized. Acknowledging that stigma has a tendency to become perpetuated through societal contexts illustrates the importance of acknowledging student attitudes. The movement of the research is only functional through the elements of both methodological cogs—mixed methods and appreciative inquiry—which are visually represented in Figure 1. The mixed methods approach supports the researcher in understanding what attitudinal trends exist in current educational systems and how they differ by age. Figure 1 further outlines this theoretical framework visually by illuminating the importance of school as a societal context where attitudes can be reinforced or created which as displayed can impact future societal participation.

Strengths, Risks, and Limitations of the Study

This research is complemented by the development and use of a variety of data collection tools. Particular attention was given to ensuring the data collection tools followed appreciative inquiry principles by promoting discussion of positive experiences. Furthermore, questions were developed with reference to previous research studies to add

to the current literature and discussion. Finally, students were presented with multiple opportunities to share their viewpoints and experiences, thus increasing validity and providing a thorough understanding of their overall attitudes towards peers with exceptionalities.

Risks and Limitations

The research has the potential to be limited by site and participant selection, reactivity, and researcher bias. The research site was selected through convenience sampling following ethics clearance from both Brock University and the school board. Research was therefore conducted based on a school that indicated availability to commit to a research project. This potentially limits the study as there may be reasons as to why some schools would deny research participation that could prevent the possibility of being able to generalize the population being studied. Similarly, participants were selected in a potentially biased manner, as they were referred by teacher and researcher nomination and although 74 students were asked to participate in the study, only 27 (36%) consented to do so. This may limit the diversity in viewpoints and discussion data obtained, however the smaller sample size allowed for a more in-depth and intimate conversation with participants through the class discussion portion. In addition to the limitations associated with site and participant selection, the research may also be limited by response bias and reactivity from both the participants and researcher.

Participants in this study were aware they were completing a questionnaire related to their attitudes towards exceptionalities, which Creswell (2013) indicates may present limitations due to their reactivity. Reactivity can impact the study through either social desirability or self-promotion whereby the participants may have attempted to present

themselves in positive way or responded in ways that they believed would make them look admirable (Creswell, 2013). This risk however has been minimized through triangulation of data where multiple pieces of evidence (i.e., interviews, discussions, questionnaires) have been gathered to analyze the convergence of data. Therefore, overall themes and conclusions have been drawn from various data sources, enhancing validity (Almalki, 2016).

Finally, researcher bias may have affected the interpretation of the research results as the analysis was completed by one individual. The trends that the researcher deducted from the data may be different than the trends or themes another researcher would have chosen to focus on. An audit trail was therefore established to outline evidence of the coding and thematic choices made by the researcher. Both the initial codes and transition log to the final themes are outlined in the analysis section of this report. Furthermore, bracketing was used reflect, identify, and set aside the researcher's preconceptions regarding student attitudes (Tufford & Newman, 2010). This is evident throughout personal reflections made by the researcher prior to the initiation and design of the research project. Ultimately, the results should be interpreted with recognition to the selection methods, participant response bias and reactivity, and finally, researcher bias in order to determine accurate directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusion practices have undergone a complex and continuous development in Ontario in response to various social and political movements. Spaulding and Pratt (2015) argued that the ways in which individuals with exceptionalities have been treated throughout history has been in response to both societal norms and corresponding attitudes. In order to comprehend the current state and composition of both inclusive classrooms and corresponding attitudes in Ontario today, it is essential to review a sample of the numerous inclusion movements and practices that have occurred in Canada and within Ontario throughout history.

Inclusion Movements Throughout History

Historically, our treatment and societal placement of children with exceptionalities has been harsh and often cruel. Bennett, Dworet, and Weber (2013) provided an overview of historic practices in relation to working, living, and teaching children with exceptionalities beginning with the then socially acceptable practice of abandoning children deemed exceptional in clay vessels in Athens, Greece. Spaulding and Pratt (2015) suggested that these types of practices represent a direct reflection of cultural attitudes within a given time period. Children with exceptionalities were often considered a burden, unteachable, or even as entertainment within ancient societies (Bennett et al., 2013; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). As a result, children with exceptionalities therefore experienced consistent exclusion, isolation, and institutionalization (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

In the late 1600s, English philosopher and physician John Locke's views of exceptionalities and inclusion offered a monumental change in attitudes when he

presented his views of tabula rasa, which deemed all children to be “blank-slates” (Bennett et al., 2013). Locke felt that all children were teachable and had individual potential, which forwarded a greater degree of acceptance within some societies. However, some of these early views revolved around a charity-based idea of inclusion ultimately considering those with exceptionalities as suffering and deserving of pity or compassion (Moeschen, 2006).

Charity Versus Rights-Based Inclusion

Moeschen (2006) explained that these views of compassion and pity often perpetuated the attitude that individuals with exceptionalities were not capable of participating in society as active participants and ultimately created feelings of otherness. This also generated the societal belief that those with exceptionalities were “in need” and that we should feel sympathetic towards individuals with exceptionalities (Moeschen, 2006). However, current understandings of disability reflect a rights-based approach where individual ability and autonomy are more widely recognized. This societal shift has led us to our current understanding that people who have exceptionalities are entitled to equal access to justice, employment, education, and decision-making opportunities (Chavan & Rozatkar, 2014).

Introduction of Special Education

Despite, these early initiatives aimed at increasing acceptance in the 1600s, it was still another two centuries until the formal introduction of special education in the mid 1800s when specialized schools for students with hearing and visual impairments were opened (Bennett et al., 2013; Jahnukainen, 2011; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Spaulding and Pratt (2015) suggested that the first special education centres were opened based on

hearing and visual impairments as they were most easily recognized. During these initial special education practices, services were generally only offered in settings outside of the traditional school which was shown through the development of a number of separate educational institutions throughout Canada between the 1800s and early 1900s (Jahnukainen, 2011).

In 1969, Nova Scotia became the first province to introduce legislation for students with exceptionalities (Jordan, 2001; McBride, 2013) in Canada. Ontario later became the third province to implement special educational legislation with the development of Bill 82 under the 1980 Ontario Education Act (Jordan, 2001; McBride, 2013). Bill 82 remains one of the most instrumental pieces of special educational history in Ontario due to a number of significant provisions. Jordan (2001) and Bennett et al. (2013) highlighted the following provisions in their works to demonstrate the significance of Bill 82:

- A mandatory requirement for school boards to offer special education programs and services.
- The requirement for all children to be provided with a school placement regardless of disability.
- The responsibility of school boards to develop IPRCs, to identify whether students are exceptional, and to determine appropriate placements.

Furthermore, both Bennett et al. (2013) and McBride (2013) elaborate upon Canada's development of special education by referencing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) which allowed families with children who had exceptionalities to

advocate for their right to a publicly funded education. Bennett et al. (2013) explained the Charter's provisions which state that:

- All children have a right to an education.
- All children have a right to an appropriate education.
- All children have a right to an appropriate education in the most enabling environment.

These provisions ultimately forwarded a belief that integrating all students into regular classrooms settings could be the most beneficial practice (Bennett et al., 2013).

Inclusion Practices and Beliefs in Canada

In May 1991, a Ministerial statement to Ontario legislature suggested that the integration of students with exceptionalities should be the norm whenever possible, as long as the students' needs were met and parental choice was consistent with an integrated placement (Jordan, 2001). However, Jordan (2001) explained that this statement often left parents in a position where they were required to justify why their child should be placed within an integrated setting which often depended upon a diagnostic label. Both Jordan as well as Bennett et al. (2013) recognize Canada's historic dependence on categorical criteria, explaining that funding, placement, resources, and services have frequently been dictated by a diagnostic label.

With a parental reliance on experts, Stanovich and Jordan (1998) sought to investigate how Canadian educators' beliefs and views regarding inclusion impacted educational experiences for students with exceptionalities. Thirty-three teachers participated in their study and provided both questionnaire and interview responses, ultimately revealing that the majority of participating teachers shared a medical

pathological view consistent with the need for a diagnostic label. In 1998, Stanovich and Jordan therefore determined that many Canadian teachers felt students with exceptionalities should be taught by teachers with additional qualifications or specializations. In the same year, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to provide modifications to curriculum requirements for students with exceptionalities in the classroom (Bennett et al., 2013).

Ontario and Special Education

According to Bennett et al. (2013), Ontario schools consider five common placement options for students with exceptionalities:

- The student may remain in their regular classroom and receive indirect support from their teacher who has sought out strategies from a resource teacher or special education teacher.
- The student may receive assistance from a resource teacher who may enter the classroom during regular instructional time periods.
- The student may remain in the regular classroom, and be withdrawn at times for additional assistance in a more suitable environment.
- The student may be partially-integrated and spend time in both their regular classroom and a self-contained classroom.
- The student may be placed in a full time self-contained class, in which case their placement should remain intervention focussed and subject to regular review.

Bennett et al. suggested that any placement arrangement should be flexible and modified as needed with an objective of returning the student to their regular classroom when possible.

Furthermore, provisions listed in the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) curriculum document seek to support classroom placements by stating that it is the responsibility of staff and students to show and value diversity in the classroom (Malins, 2016). Malins (2016) furthered this discussion, stating that schools are required by mandate to provide all students with safe environments that are free from harassment. Ultimately, special education has become a normalized component of Ontario's education system (Bennett et al., 2013). However, despite these documents and mandated special educational practices, it is still essential to consider how attitudes can impact a student's inclusive experience.

The Social Model of Disability

Scior et al. (2013) suggested attitudes and stigma are interconnected in today's society with the general outcome being that individuals with exceptionalities are labeled, evaluated negatively, and may experience discrimination despite the expectation of positive integration. The Social Model of Disability recognizes that stigma impacts overall experience and further explains that some people feel permanently stigmatized in various contexts (Davis, 1997). School can act as a site of permanent stigmatization as children spend an excessive amount of time within this context. Davis (1997) suggested that stigmatization in these environments can lead to feelings of entrapment and rejection over time. This may be due to the barriers children find themselves facing on a consistent basis. Bailey, Harris, and Simpson (2015) suggested that the physical, social, or cultural barriers that individuals face are separate from their exceptionality and add another level of potential challenge to daily living. Bailey et al. further acknowledged negative

attitudes as one of the most challenging barriers an individual with an exceptionality may have to face.

Oliver (1990) referenced an implication of negative societal attitudes in his discussion of the creation of the “other,” whereby individuals perceive only the differences that people with exceptionalities possess, and therefore label them as an atypical group. Hodkinson (2007) found that children may unknowingly “other” individuals with exceptionalities depending on their own socialization and immediate role models within the home.

One of the most important components of the Social Model of Disability is the recognition that the negative feelings arising from stigmatization are not the result of the individual, but represent societal frameworks (Davis, 1997). The Social Model of Disability explains that individuals with exceptionalities face barriers and are impacted by negative attitudes held towards them by society as a whole, thereby emphasizing the necessity of eliminating these negative attitudes. Oliver (1990) acknowledged that the elimination of this stigma requires steps in societal transformation to offset the perpetuated continuity of these negative attitudes; however, separating the individual from the context in which they reside is difficult. For example, inclusive classrooms in Ontario today place emphasis on acceptance and embracing diversity, however children may still be impacted by other negative views from other contexts such as home or media influences which may lack the same positive emphasis.

Relative to this study, examining the attitudes that currently exist within the classroom is essential to understanding if these attitudes are reflective of the suggested

perpetual negative stigmatization and if children are likely to continually be exposed to this stigma throughout their lives.

Attitudes Towards Exceptionalities

Attitudes are defined as a tendency to respond with a specific emotion towards people, objects, or events (Hodkinson, 2007). Hodkinson (2007) suggested that attitudes are created when we develop *consistent* tendencies to respond in a certain manner when confronted with specific stimuli.

Early Development of Attitudes

It is suggested that attitudes can be formed in children through their surrounding environments including the people and places that they most commonly interact with (Hong, Kwon, & Jeon, 2014). Hodkinson (2007) cites Bandura's (1986) early theories of behaviour, specifically Social Learning Theory which states that behaviours are learned quickly through observation and imitation. Therefore, children can develop attitudes towards objects, people, or places in one consistent environment such as their home and transfer these views to other situations such as school. Hodkinson further elaborates that children construct their attitudes and perceptions through play-based interactions and often unknowingly agree on common norms and expectations quickly. Children tend to abide by these norms in multiple contexts and draw upon them when they see difference or experience interactions that do not conform to the norms they have constructed (Youniss, 1980). For example, a child who exhibits unfamiliar behaviours during play (such as outbursts) may elicit negative attitudinal responses from peers such as avoidance or intolerance. However, these learned attitudes and normalized expectations vary and may relate to welcoming, empathetic, protective, interested, hostile, considerate, friendly,

or intolerant social behaviours based on each child's previous interactions and experiences (Hodkinson, 2007).

Hong et al. (2014) furthered this discussion of attitudinal development by offering an explanation of three types of attitudinal responses, including cognitive, affective, and behavioural tendencies. This presents the argument that attitude is not only comprised of the way children physically respond to a situation (behavioural), but also by the way they think (cognitive) and feel (affective) about a situation or circumstance. Similar to earlier findings, Hong et al. discussed that attitudinal tendencies are often influenced through parental modelling or explicit teaching in childhood. It is commonly accepted that children's earliest attitudes are influenced by their primary caregiver (Hong et al., 2014). Hong et al.'s study investigating attitudes towards individuals with exceptionalities discovered that kindergarten children with parents who were accepting of difference and comfortable in diverse situations had more positive attitudes towards individuals with exceptionalities than same-aged students who did not have peers with exceptionalities in the classroom. This research highlights the impact of both the home and parental involvement in the formation of attitudes. Children who witness these positive scenarios construct similar attitudes and transfer these expectations into their own social situations (Hong et al., 2014).

Subsequently, teachers can take advantage of this early development of attitudes by providing children with opportunities to experience learning together through inclusive practices (Henderson & Lasley, 2014). In a study completed by Hong et al. (2014), children between the ages of 4 and 5 participated in an interview where they were asked to make inclusive decisions based on hypothetical scenarios. Hong et al. concluded that children

who had prior experience in inclusive settings or interacting with people who have exceptionalities held more positive attitudes and were therefore more likely to favour inclusion. Krahe and Altwasser (2006) discussed similar findings while drawing reference to Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis which emphasized the idea that exposure to difference improves attitudes by increasing understanding and developing empathetic tendencies. Krahe and Altwasser's study focused on improving attitudes in 70 students through both cognitive and cognitive-behavioural interventions. The students who participated in the cognitive-behavioural component of the study interacted with physically disabled athletes in a recreational setting and reported more significant positive changes in their attitudes towards disability than those who only received a cognitive intervention emphasizing the impact of social interaction on attitudinal development.

Interestingly, multiple researchers determined that in comparison to adults, children typically hold more positive attitudes towards difference and exceptionalities which may be a direct reflection of current inclusionary practices (Georgiadi, Kalyva, Kourkoutas, & Tsakiris, 2012; Hodkinson, 2007). Ontario teachers work to ensure a sense of belonging and inclusiveness in their classrooms by creating an open community where each student is valued (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). As teachers implement best practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or Differentiated Instruction to set their students up for success, differences become both valued and expected in the classroom.

Impact of Negative Attitudes in the Classroom

Despite acknowledging the potential to foster inclusive attitudes at early ages in the classroom, it has also been found that many children still hold negative attitudes and

perceptions towards their peers with exceptionalities (Hodkinson, 2007; Litvak et al., 2011; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Hodkinson (2007) stated that children often associate exceptionalities with something being “wrong” and therefore may be less likely to engage with these students. Hong et al. (2014) and Youniss (1980) similarly stated that children are more likely to form friendships with children with similar qualities, which often excludes children who have exceptionalities. Furthermore, Hodkinson found that children as young as 4 years old preferred friends who were able-bodied. When considering why students avoided contact or relationship building with students who had exceptionalities, research shows that student attitudes play a large role (Cameron, 2014; Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013). Both Cameron (2014) and Ekeh and Oladayo (2013) determined that peers found externalizing behaviour from many students to be frustrating and distracting in the learning environment.

Students with exceptionalities often require additional reminders and support which can become boring and frustrating for the other students (Cameron, 2014; Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013). Furthermore, in a literature review of 20 studies regarding student attitudes towards peers with exceptionalities, de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2012) found that the type or category of exceptionality corresponded to overall student attitudes. Specially referencing a 2005 study by Law and Kelly, de Boer et al. explained that attitudes were less favourable towards students with behavioural exceptionalities as opposed to those with physical or intellectual exceptionalities. Although de Boer et al. acknowledged the limited amount of research documenting attitude differences amongst the various categories of exceptionalities, it was suggested that there is a need for further research surrounding behavioural exceptionalities as it is often abnormal or intrusive

behavioural concerns that impact social experiences between typically developing students and those with behavioural exceptionalities.

Similarly, Litvak et al.'s (2011) study on inclusive classrooms, the researchers conducted an interview with average- to high-achieving students. One of the findings reported by the researchers was that students noted that the teacher would often have to stop lessons to deal with inappropriate behaviour (Litvak et al., 2011). Litvak et al. also indicated that many students felt that they could not learn as much when working alongside peers who had exceptionalities due to communication differences. These students worried that their own academic success was threatened (Litvak et al., 2011).

In addition to the attitudes students held about their peers with exceptionalities related to academics, Cairns and McClatchey (2013) and Litvak et al. (2011) found that many students held negative social attitudes about their peers as well. Students commented that they did not feel comfortable socializing with the students who had exceptionalities because they feared they might also be teased (Litvak et al., 2011). Cairns and McClatchey found that junior students who had exceptionalities were viewed in lower social standing and had fewer friends than their typically developing peers. Son et al. (2012) further determined that approximately 21-30% of students with exceptionalities reported peer victimization at school.

When students experience the reality of these potentially negative attitudes, previous research has indicated likely association with feelings of self-blame, loneliness, and anxiety (Georgiadi et al., 2012; MacMillan et al., 2014). de Boer et al. (2012) also elaborated on the impact of negative peer attitudes towards exceptionalities through reference to a cyclical effect whereby students with exceptionalities may internalize

negativity resulting in additional problematic behaviour patterns, mental health concerns, and declining academic performance. Parents of students with exceptionalities suggested that these attitudes are more disabling for their children than the actual disability itself (Son et al., 2012), while students have reported that social rejection was the worst part of their school experience (Godeau et al., 2010), emphasizing the significance of peer attitudes on children's development.

The Importance of Peer Attitudes

Social interaction and collaboration are integral components of 21st century education. Students are often required to work together, consult one another, and problem solve in group settings. Social interactions therefore are a key element of high-quality learning experiences (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattey, & Raley, 2015). Unfortunately, many students with exceptionalities struggle to sustain positive relationships with their peers (Brock et al., 2015). These difficulties can arise from physical isolation in the classroom, uncertainty in peer communication, or frequent adult interaction (Brock et al., 2015). For example, students may avoid another student in their class who receives consistent support or direction from an educator. Brock et al. (2015) therefore proposed that peer support arrangements can work to increase positive social interactions by increasing confidence, proximity, and diminishing the barrier of adult support systems. These peer support arrangements included strategies such as having peers explain a task, offer encouragement, or repeat instructions. In relation to Hong et al.'s (2014) findings, Brock et al. also indicated that by increasing positive experiences with children who have exceptionalities, students may hold more understanding, accepting, and inclusive attitudes. Following, the implementation of a series of peer support arrangements, nine

out of 10 participating students indicated they would like to continue providing peer support because they enjoyed getting to know the student, helping others, and learning about others (Brock et al., 2015).

Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, and Borns's (2015) similar study of 65 inclusive classrooms found that many of the classrooms utilized student supports such as UDL principles, flexible grouping, accommodations, modifications, and peer arrangements to foster positive learning environments for students with exceptionalities. Specifically, peer-supported learning was observed on 60 different occasions throughout their research including conversation, prompting, and reminders. This study specifically supports the development of positive attitudes as Hodkinson (2007) explained that when students understand their peers, fewer negative responses will occur. Cairns and McClatchey (2013) furthered this claim noting that inclusive classrooms foster empathetic development and reduce anxiety of the unfamiliar.

Developing Positive Attitudes

By noting the flexibility and malleability of young attitudes as outlined by Hodkinson (2007), reference to ongoing classroom learning is an essential component of developing and maintaining positive attitudes towards exceptionalities. de Boer et al. (2012) explained that students are more accepting when their knowledge base and understanding of exceptionalities is reported as higher. This can be accomplished through class exposure to posters, books, and videos that include individuals who have exceptionalities (de Boer et al., 2012). Furthermore, in a study by Godeau et al. (2010) aimed at improving peer support and social exchanges amongst grade seven students, it was found that participation in an attitudinal questionnaire alone impacted and improved

student attitudes. By simply exposing and recognizing personal attitudes, Godeau et al. explained that the questionnaire allowed students to consider and reconsider their views of difference and inclusion. Lindsay and Edwards (2013) suggested that by prompting students to recognize and consider their attitudes towards others, positive development can occur as children's attitudes are constantly evolving.

Student attitudes are carried into inclusive classroom settings along with their existing knowledge of those who may have exceptionalities. Although some research suggests that those who have had previous contact with individuals who have exceptionalities hold more positive attitudes compared to peers who did not have frequent contact with individuals who have exceptionalities, both Hodkinson (2007) and Georgiadi et al. (2012) reported a discrepancy between reported attitudes and actual behaviours within inclusive settings. For example, although many students verbally communicated positive views regarding individuals with exceptionalities, observable behaviour did not always correlate strongly to their statements (Georgiadi et al., 2012).

Inclusive Classroom Settings

Inclusive classrooms and practices have ultimately become a priority for the Western world (Tkachyk, 2013). Henderson and Lasley (2014) suggested that the core purpose of inclusion is to ensure all students are accepted and feel a sense of value and belonging. Furthermore, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) denotes within their curriculum documents that diversity will be valued, and all members of the school community should feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. This also includes students with exceptionalities participating in classroom settings with all peers and benefiting from additional supports as needed (Yildez, 2013). Malins (2016) further included in her

discussion the idea that inclusion should move beyond physical inclusion and that it is essential that inclusive classrooms practise respect for difference and equitable treatment.

Although inclusive classrooms are common practice in Ontario, researchers caution that inclusive classrooms must be consciously created and extend beyond simply having students of varying abilities, strengths, and needs in the same physical space. de Boer et al. (2012) emphasized that physical inclusion does not guarantee acceptance or friendship and Bennett (2009) explained that inclusion must be more than simply “allowing” students with exceptionalities in the classroom. Furthermore, Lindsay and Edward’s (2013) systematic review of 42 studies found a consistent emphasis that physical inclusion was not always correlated with acceptance. Educators must consider the importance of family collaboration, socio-economic and cultural diversity, individualized accommodations or modifications, and behavioural support systems (Henderson & Lasley, 2014; Morningstar et al., 2015).

Reported Benefits

In successful inclusive classrooms, positive attitudes towards students with exceptionalities have resulted in both academic and social gains for students. Ekeh and Oladayo (2013) determined that students who had exceptionalities performed better in inclusive classrooms due to the instructional scaffolding and interaction that occurs. Hodkinson (2007) also found that students with exceptionalities experienced a better quality of education from inclusive settings that allowed them to profit both academically and socially. Cairns and McClatchey (2013) supported these findings, explaining that all students in an inclusive environment learn the importance of social skills such as rule following, controlling outbursts, managing conflict, and learning to cooperate.

Additionally, students in inclusive classrooms who do not have exceptionalities also display increased levels of social empathy and understanding (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013). As students realize that their peers who have exceptionalities can learn and interact on similar levels, they often possess greater levels of helpfulness and a sense of responsibility towards helping each other succeed.

However, despite these benefits that occur which affect the attitudes of peers towards exceptionalities in the classroom, De Silva (2013) and Krahe and Altwasser (2006) cautioned that effective inclusion requires a significant amount of collaboration, family involvement, clear roles, and adequate resources. Student interaction may result in acceptance and/or tolerance, however in order to form meaningful friendships and relationships, additional steps such as an emphasis on equal status or common classroom goals is required (Krahe & Altwasser, 2006). Students must be encouraged to engage in learning tasks where all skill sets and strengths are valued and included. Without meeting these requirements, inclusive classrooms may not function to change attitudes as successfully as the research indicates possible.

Barriers to Success

Although most teachers work to ensure their classroom is an inclusive environment where all students feel empowered to learn and succeed, teacher practice and student social skills may act as barriers to the successful implementation of this type of environment.

Role of the teacher. In acknowledging, the amount of work educators must put forth to create a truly inclusive classroom, many researchers question how ready graduating teacher candidates are to foster positive inclusion experiences for all students

(Coady, Harper, & De Jong, 2015; Florian, 2012). Florian's (2012) research references the demand for inclusive practices, finding many teachers commenting that they did not feel adequately prepared to support all students. Brock et al. (2015) suggested a number of responsibilities teachers may take on to support the development of a truly inclusive classroom, including identifying peer support strategies, helping students identify common interests, initiating meaningful conversations, prompting peer support and engagement, and providing necessary information to peers regarding exceptionalities. However, Ekeh and Olaydao (2013) explained that it is challenging for teachers to make the environment conducive to all students, which can be frustrating for students and impact their attitudes. If teachers provide increased attention to those with exceptionalities, other students may become frustrated with their peers and often tend to exhibit less positive behaviour and helpfulness towards them (Cameron, 2014).

Similarly, Yildez (2013) refers to past studies where teachers have indicated that students with exceptionalities exhibit externalizing behaviours which negatively impact the learning environment for others. Unfortunately, although teachers are willing to provide individual attention to students with exceptionalities when outbursts occur, very few teachers make instructional changes to proactively benefit students (Yildez, 2013). In a study completed by Sucuoglu, Bakkaloglu, Karsu, Demir, and Akalin (2009), 38% of teachers reported providing additional attention to students with identified exceptionalities; however, only 7% indicated they changed their teaching methods or approach to accommodate difficulties. Sucuolgu et al. suggested that appropriate changes may have included implementing behaviour management strategies or specific routines.

Understanding and responding proactively to student needs is ultimately paramount to the success of inclusive classrooms.

Prerequisite social skills. Inclusion does not always impact students in the same way as many students who have exceptionalities often report remaining isolated in these environments (Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). De Silva (2013) and Georgiadi et al. (2012) suggested that students may require certain social skills to be successful such as an understanding of appropriate behaviour and social norms. Without these understandings, students are more likely to be rejected by their peers for acting in socially inappropriate ways. For this reason, Tkachyk (2013) suggested that inclusive classrooms may not benefit all students despite the reported increase in positive attitudes.

Mallabar (2016) discussed the importance of peer-mediated social skills programs with reference to classroom implementation. Mallabar outlined the success of peer-mediated programs in promoting positive peer relationships in inclusive classroom settings while emphasizing individual benefits such as decreased feelings of anxiety and increased reports of belonging. Mallabar highlighted the impact of peer relationships as opposed to educator intervention which may still leave students with exceptionalities feeling centred-out or *different*. Lindsay and Edwards (2013) suggested that these programs may be necessary due to student uncertainty, explaining that children often only interact with those who have exceptionalities when prompted by an educator. Throughout their research, Lindsay and Edwards also explained that many of the studies they reviewed in their meta-analysis used a social contact approach such as buddy systems or circle of friends to facilitate social interactions with lasting effects. Lasting effects were measured in these studies through follow up interviews, observations, and

questionnaires. Consistent positive results of these social skills programs may indicate that a lack of social interaction between typically developing students and those who have exceptionalities is often the result of a lack of knowledge and understanding as opposed to negative attitudes.

Conclusion

In summation, recent literature surrounding the development and significance of peer attitudes towards students with exceptionalities emphasizes the importance of fostering a truly inclusive environment beyond physical integration. Acceptance is not a natural by-product of integration (de Boer et al., 2012; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013; Malins, 2016). Truly inclusive classrooms are often the result of consistent educator effort focussing on instructional strategies, social arrangements, and clear expectations which work to develop positive attitudes (de Boer et al., 2012; Sucuoglu et al., 2009; Yildiz, 2013). The impact of social interaction and peer support amongst students with exceptionalities and their typically developing peers has been documented throughout numerous studies illustrating the ways in which positive inclusive practices support the development and maintenance of empathetic and understanding peer attitudes (De Silva, 2013; Georgiadi et al., 2012; Hong et al., 2014; Krahe & Altwasser, 2006). Throughout the literature, many students reported that they often enjoyed learning about and helping peers in their classroom who had exceptionalities (Brock et al., 2015; Cairns & McClatchey, 2013).

Although many factors impact the development of attitudes—such as exposure, parental influence, and media sources (Hodkinson, 2007)—it is understood that within the social context of schooling, children’s attitudes remain malleable (Godeau et al.,

2010; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013). Positive attitudinal development can therefore be supported within educational contexts through learning materials, educator effort, and social scenarios (de Boer et al., 2012; Yildiz, 2013), however without these crucial efforts, students may maintain or develop negative attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities. It has further been suggested that specific categories of exceptionality may correlate to attitudes (de Boer et al., 2012) and that behavioural difference may elicit more negative attitudinal responses due to learning disruptions and invisible differences (Cameron, 2014; Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013).

It is also important to acknowledge that attitudes have been measured throughout the research in three distinct ways: affective, behavioural, and cognitive. These measures work to outline the complexity of student attitudes and corresponding beliefs and actions and ultimately, although attitudinal development and tendencies have been researched extensively, a discrepancy still exists regarding peer attitudes towards students with exceptionalities in the classroom. Many research studies outline positive peer attitudes which have been documented within the classroom (helpfulness, empathy, understanding, support), while some findings reference more negative attitudes (frustration, annoyance, rejection). Therefore, the purpose of this research project was to thoroughly examine one school through both qualitative and quantitative measures in order to gain an understanding of current peer attitudes within a specific context.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Using a mixed methods approach, student attitudes towards their peers who may be identified with exceptionalities were explored and compared in order to gain a deeper understanding of student knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes towards peers with exceptionalities. The results obtained were used to further understanding regarding the types of attitudes which may be perpetuated throughout educational and by extension, societal trends. Creswell (2014) suggested that by using a concurrent triangulation mixed methods approach, researchers can offer a more comprehensive examination of various types of data (i.e., both qualitative and quantitative) enabling a holistic understanding of certain situational contexts. Research therefore commenced with a classroom discussion, followed by a questionnaire regarding student attitudes, with specific students nominated to partake in individual interviews for an in-depth exploration of attitudinal responses.

Site and Participant Selection

Following ethics clearance (File No. 15-222) from both Brock University (Appendix A) and the selected Catholic School Board in Southern Ontario, the faculty supervisor contacted three principals. The principal who agreed to participate was provided with both informal (Appendix B) and formal (Appendix C) research invitation letters to distribute to faculty members. Once the principal agreed to allow the researcher to use their school as a research site, the researcher personally consulted with the principal to outline the study by providing copies of all necessary data collection tools and consent forms. This use of non-probability convenience sampling to select a research site is explained by Creswell (2015) as being a simplistic way to facilitate data collection.

Creswell (2015) explained that selecting sites based on convenience can support researchers by enabling timely research. Upon confirmation of participation, mutually convenient dates were agreed upon and the researcher mailed teacher invitation letters (Appendix C), parent invitation letters (Appendix D), parent consent forms (Appendix E), and student assent forms (Appendix F) to the school.

Within the selected school, a classroom from each school division (primary, junior, and intermediate) was asked to participate in a mini lesson (Appendix G) to ensure comfort with the topic, minimize the occurrence of potential *othering* through connection to fictional characters, and ensure they were responding to and considering a broad understanding of exceptionalities. Students were then asked to complete a brief attitudinal survey (Appendix I) to determine trends in attitudes towards students who have exceptionalities. Following the quantitative survey, three students from each division were selected by teacher nomination to participation in a 5-minute individual interview with the researcher. By using teacher nominations for participant selection, the researcher was able to gain detailed feedback from participants who were comfortable and knowledgeable talking about students with exceptionalities. The small number of students who participated in the interviews was ideal due to time constraints and financial feasibility, and also provided the opportunity for potentially diverse viewpoints within the same education division to enrich the thoroughness of the study.

The research site was selected through a non-probability sampling method based on convenience and ultimately seeking a school which had administrators, teachers, and students who were available and willing to participate in the study. The selected site is a self-described inclusive school setting with no segregated classrooms according to the

Principal's Message section of the participating school's website. Following site and teacher selection, all students within each of the three classrooms were invited to participate, with no exclusionary criteria limiting participation in order to reflect inclusivity (see Table 1). Within each of those three classrooms, teacher nomination determined interview participants operating under the assumption that classroom teachers would have knowledge regarding which students would feel comfortable and additionally, which students they thought may have had personal inclusive experiences. Criteria for this process of participant selection therefore included when possible (a) students who were comfortable speaking and (b) students whom the teacher believed possessed a high level of experience with inclusivity.

Instruments

The instruments used within this study include the mini lesson, questionnaire, and interview. Creation of these three tools included a careful consideration of language usage, the possibility of othering, and the appreciative inquiry lens.

Use of Language

Language is a crucial tool within education and is consistently undergoing evolution and change (Osgood, 2006). Osgood (2006) explained how the meanings and functions of language and terminology have the potential to evoke confusion and controversy within institutions and policies. The language used within the research was therefore considered flexible. Educators were consulted prior to the study's commencement to determine the appropriate and familiar language used within their schools (i.e., exceptionality, disability, special need). The purpose of this consultation was to acknowledge the sensitivity of the topic and its corresponding terminology.

Table 1

Number of Participants per Study Component

Grade(s)	Classroom	Mini lesson	Questionnaire	Interview	Percentage of participating students
3	19	6	6	2	32%
4/5	25	4	4	3*	20%
8	30	16	16	3	53%
Total:	74	26	26	8	36%

*One participant in Grade 4/5 consented to complete the interview but did not consent to complete the questionnaire, resulting in 27 participants.

It was also essential to outline the process by which the language and content of the questions were structured. The topics of inclusion, exceptionalities, and children's attitudes are also sensitive and personal; therefore, a lengthy process of revision and clarification was undertaken to ensure the most appropriate construction of language and questioning. Primarily, the use of an Appreciative Inquiry lens in the formation of interview questions aimed to alleviate a negative connotation surrounding the content of the questions. Furthermore, consultation with three experts (Professors at Brock University) occurred throughout revision processes over the initial 8 months of the proposal creation. Throughout this process, a concern that was inevitably raised was in relation to the concept of othering.

Disrupting Othering

Traustadottir (2001) defined othering as treating or viewing a group of individuals as different from the majority or "norm." Within the research, students were asked to consider their attitudes towards children who have exceptionalities which presents the challenge of othering by which children may have thought about how such individuals are different from themselves. Traustadottir cautioned that this has the potential to recreate or perpetuate otherness within social contexts as individuals are reminded or informed of differences in representation. Traustadottir further explained that othering is often difficult to avoid in research surrounding specific groups and therefore offered a strategy which she refers to as "disrupting othering," which uses the power of language to reduce the negative effects that othering can have throughout the process of research. As mentioned, language has a significant impact in research (Osgood, 2006; Traustadottir, 2001), and Traustadottir therefore suggested that it can be

used to diminish the negative implications of othering by selecting language wisely. For example, students were reminded throughout the study that they may think of anyone they know with an exceptionality as to dissuade a focus on specific classroom peers.

In addition to the careful selection of language and questioning in consultation with expert opinion, othering has been disrupted through the use of multiple social stories. The goal of including social stories within the research primarily functioned to provide students with a clear example of what it may be like to have a student with an exceptionality in their classroom. Furthermore, the use of a social story additionally functioned to deter students from specifically thinking about their classroom peers when considering students with exceptionalities. The social stories provided fictional examples of students whom the participants may have considered when answering some of the questions.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

In order to avoid negative connotations and problem-orientated questioning (Hennesy & Hughes, 2014), AI was considered in the development of each research instrument. The use of AI prompted participants to consider their best experiences with peers who have exceptionalities through strength-based wording (Pill, 2016). For example, on the questionnaire, statements such as “I would enjoy” and “I would start a conversation” dominate the instrument. During the interview, students were further prompted to share positive experiences such as playing a sport or helping a peer with an exceptionality. Pill (2016) explained that by focusing on positive aspects of individuals’ experiences, researchers can shift away from a deficit based approach. Similarly, Røndigs (2017) shared that through the use of positive psychology, the AI approach benefits participants by offering a more optimistic research experience. The final research

question correspondingly asked participants to consider why it is important to include all peers as opposed to asking them if they believe it is important to include their peers.

Mini Lesson

All students initially participated in the mini lesson component of the study which was comprised of a brainstorm component, two social stories, a visual collage of children with exceptionalities, and discussion questions (Appendix G). The two stories used were *Looking After Louis* by Lesley Ely and *What About Owen?* by Monique Somma. *Looking After Louis* is a story about a young boy with ASD whose peers learn about the various ways that Louis works and plays. Throughout the story, Louis's peers learn to include Louis in ways that make sense to him. *What About Owen?* shares the story of a teacher who challenges her students to critique and analyze the classrooms barriers that exist for a classmate with a physical exceptionality. After reading both stories, students were asked to consider the actions of the peers in both characters' classrooms. They were also asked to consider if all students with exceptionalities would be like Louis and Owen. After a brief discussion, students were shown the collage of children with exceptionalities and asked to further consider various types of exceptionalities. The purpose of the mini lesson was to increase both comfort and knowledge prior to completing the questionnaire. Students were informed that their discussion would be recorded using an app so that the researcher would be able to transcribe discussions at a later date. Although the mini lesson's intended use was simply to spark thinking and minimize the potential occurrence of othering, valuable discussion was generated and recorded.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix I) which was distributed to each of the three

classrooms was adapted from Hong et al.'s (2014), Cairns and McClatchey's (2013), and Cameron's (2014) research studies. The questionnaire also included psychometrically validated questions from Findler, Vilchinsky, and Werner's (2007) "Multidimensional Attitudes Scale Towards Persons With Disabilities (MAS)." Questions from the above-mentioned studies were modified to accommodate young learners and to promote positive thinking (see Appendix J for full explanation). Findler et al. noted the importance of exploring attitude in reference to three distinct components—affect, cognition, and behaviour—due to the complexity within the construct of attitude. Findler et al. therefore explained that it is essential to explore attitudes through a thorough and multidimensional examination. The affective component within the MAS investigates attitudes in reference to their emotional basis while the cognitive component explores the ideas, thoughts, and perceptions regarding a person's attitude (Findler et al., 2007). Both of these components were developed using the affective component from Russell's (1980) Model of Affect and Fichten and Amsel's (1988) College Interaction Self Statement Tests. Finally, the behavioural component considered individuals' willingness to act certain way towards others (Findler et al., 2007).

The MAS has been validated by statistical analysis and has been deemed to be a reliable instrument through an empirical test that compared its reliability and validity to the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons Scale (Findler et al., 2007). However, it is important to note that by modifying the MAS to appropriate its contents to this study, existing measures of reliability and validity cannot be recognized as true.

The MAS was modified (see Appendix J) in order to include student-friendly language while still addressing the three components (affect, cognition, and behaviour) as

suggested by Findler et al. (2007). Part one of the questionnaire was structured to address each component through a 5-point Likert scale that provided students with opportunities to share their experiences and beliefs (i.e., behaviour and cognition) while part two provided students with the chance to share their feelings (i.e., affect) regarding interaction with their peers who have exceptionalities. For example, question 5 addresses cognition and prompts students to think about whether they share interests with their peers who have exceptionalities, while question 8 focuses on behaviour, asking students to consider if they would start a conversation with a peer who has an exceptionality. Likert scales were utilized as Creswell (2015) suggested that they have the ability to measure opinions, beliefs, and feelings through simple number assignment although they may be limited in that individual responses may vary depending on interpretations of information.

Interview

The questions within the interview were adapted from the works of Cairns and McClatchey (2013), Hodkinson (2007), Hong et al. (2014), and Litvak et al. (2011) (see Appendix K). The opening questions used by Hong et al. introduced students to the topic in an open manner by asking them to explain what they already know about students with exceptionalities. Therefore, the opening question within the interview protocol was structured similarly to allow the researcher to gain an initial understanding of how students of various ages express their understanding of exceptionalities. The remainder of the questions were structured using an appreciative inquiry approach and seek to gain a more thorough understanding of student attitudes (see Appendix J). The question following the opening prompt asked students to consider how they could (not if they would) support a peer with an exceptionality in the classroom consistent with AI ideals.

These types of questions addressed students' willingness to support peers with exceptionalities, inclusion, and ultimately sought to understand attitudes by allowing students to share stories. Lehner and Hight (2006) explained that the use of appreciative inquiry promotes forward thinking and consideration of how everyone can support movement in positive directions. Hennesy and Hughes (2004) stated that the use of appreciative inquiry in research works to acknowledge how things can be improved without a focus on deficits.

Quantitative Classroom Procedures for Data Collection

Upon entering each classroom space, the researcher collected the consent forms of participating students and ensured that the lesson and questionnaire were checked off before proceeding with organizing participants for the mini-lesson (Appendix G). Once the participating students were organized in an appropriate space, both the researcher and faculty supervisor introduced themselves to the group and worked to create a sense of comfort by following the scripts within Appendix H and Appendix K which discussed the purpose and process of the research study as well as confidentiality. Students were provided with the assent form at this time (Appendix F) and were informed that they did not have to participate and could cease participation at any time. Following completion of the mini lesson and questionnaire, students were informed that the researcher would be returning later that week and was hoping to meet with some students again to learn more about their responses.

Quantitative Data Collection Procedures by Grade

To ensure a sense of comfort and confidence for the students participating in the surveys, quantitative data was gathered in familiar spaces for all students. Furthermore,

discussion remained open throughout quantitative data collection, allowing students to ask clarifying questions or to express any potential concerns.

Primary. Both the primary mini lesson and the questionnaires were completed within the students' homeroom classes. Participating students formed a small circle at the side of the classroom with the researcher and completed the mini lesson as a group. The questionnaire for the primary students was read aloud to the students, item by item, to ensure comprehension and understanding. Discussion remained open during this process and students were reminded throughout how the Likert scale was used.

Junior. The junior division quantitative data collection was divided into two separate sessions due to limited participation on the first visit. Similar to the structure of the primary mini lesson and questionnaire, the first data collection session occurred within the students' homeroom at a table in the corner. Students were provided time to answer the questionnaire independently as verbal prompting of each question was not required within this group. The second junior session occurred in the library. The library provided the second group of students with the necessary quiet space to engage in the research.

Intermediate. The intermediate division quantitative data collection occurred within the students' homeroom. Students who did not provide the necessary consent or assent to participate went to the computer lab with their teacher to work on alternative assignments during this time. Similar to the junior group, intermediate students did not require a verbal reading of each question.

Qualitative Classroom Procedures for Data Collection

Qualitative data collection occurred twice within each division. During the first visit, students participated in the mini lesson, and upon completion of the quantitative

survey component, the second visit to the school aimed to focus on collecting the final components of qualitative data to fulfil the structure of mixed methodology research. Students who had consented to participate in the interview component were nominated by their teacher and were read an interview protocol (Appendix K) which worked to remind students of the research purpose and confidentiality. Primary interviews were conducted within the classroom (mirroring the primary quantitative data collection process), while junior and intermediate interviews occurred within a private area of the school's library.

Creswell (2015) indicated that interviews have the potential to gather a more thorough amount of data when they are structured in an open-ended manner. For this reason, the interviews were structured in an open-ended manner allowing the researcher to prompt for further information and the participants to elaborate on questions throughout the process.

Data Analysis

One of the most important parts of mixed methods research is determining the emphasis of both qualitative and quantitative research components (Creswell, 2013). In order to consider the attitudes that students hold towards their peers who have exceptionalities, questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative interview responses were coded by examining patterned responses and links to previous data. Braun and Clarke (2006) critique qualitative data analysis in their work, commenting that researchers often deny their role in the analysis, referring simply to the way themes emerge naturally. For this reason, the qualitative analysis within this research can be referred to as a theoretical thematic analysis which includes a conscience

coding relating to specific research questions and data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Additionally, an audit trail was completed to log the evolution of codes and themes.

Triangulation of Data

Although both quantitative and qualitative data sets were initially analyzed separately, the finalized themes within the discussion consider elements and similarities within the entire data corpus. Therefore, following the analysis, both data sets were merged for interpretation allowing for a convergence of overall findings (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). This triangulation occurred across data sources and methods (i.e., discussions, interviews, questionnaires) and aimed to enhance and illustrate the overarching conclusions of the research (Almalki, 2016; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Creswell (2015) outlined four main steps to analyzing quantitative data: preparing data for analysis, conducting analysis, reporting results, and interpreting results. In order to prepare the questionnaire data for analysis, the data was entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets that allowed for secure, password-protected access with trusted organizational features. The use of the Likert scale on the questionnaire allowed the raw data scores to be inputted into a spreadsheet organized by individual single-item scores per question and per division. Descriptive statistics and frequency scores were utilized to allow for comparisons of student responses. Frequencies were generated for each question, essentially aiming to determine participants' most prevalent attitudes and responses. For example, when asked if students feel frustrated when interacting with peers who have an exceptionality, which response did the majority of the students indicate? The descriptive analysis in part two of the questionnaire also aimed to explore

total percentages including what percentage of total students report feeling happy most of the time or always when interacting with students who have exceptionalities. In order to report the results from the survey, graphs were generated within Microsoft Excel; however, qualitative comments are also used to attempt to support and enhance discussion of the findings.

Qualitative Data Analysis

To prepare the qualitative data for analysis, all classroom discussions and interviews were transcribed into word documents. The initial raw transcription of data included student pauses, stutters, and corrections such as “uhm” and “like”; however, these were eliminated within a second copy to allow for a more concise coding process. In an attempt to stay true to qualitative processes, the coding of the interviews remained open and flexible throughout data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2015). The process of coding qualitative data consisted of highlighting and organizing participant comments into categories acknowledged by the researcher. As indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Creswell (2015), these categories changed multiple times throughout the process as comments were grouped and reorganized according to prevalence, perceived importance, and relevance to previous literature. This process was inductive in nature as observations and patterns were noted between collected data and then matched to previous literature, ultimately leading to the development of overall themes (Creswell, 2014).

The initial coding process resulted in nine codes: togetherness, helping, social, physical, compassion, difference, disability, adult interaction, and giftedness. These were eventually altered and combined into four codes: knowledge surrounding exceptionalities, disability and difference, compassion, and beliefs about inclusion. As

indicated by Creswell (2015), it was essential to be aware that codes and emergent themes could be original, unexpected, and difficult to classify, emphasizing the importance of transforming the codes multiple times to ensure a thorough examination. Braun and Clarke (2006) further emphasized that final themes may include a discussion of subthemes which ultimately function to help the researcher to share the overall story of the data corpus.

Ultimately, both quantitative and qualitative data work together to provide a clear representation of student attitudes towards peers with exceptionalities within this particular school by using student comments from qualitative discussions and interviews to support the quantitative findings.

Establishing Credibility

Creswell (2013) suggested that one way to improve the reliability and validity of research is to use existing tools instead of creating your own. Therefore, this research was comprised of existing frameworks of data collection to strengthen the credibility of the results. As previously indicated, the questionnaire was developed using content from Findler et al.'s (2007) MAS. The MAS is considered to be a reliable and valid measure and has been used multiple times within the research field (Hyun Kim, Lu, & Estrada-Hernandez, 2015; Vilchinsky, Findler, & Werner, 2010); however, as mentioned, the MAS was modified to create a more concise questionnaire utilizing child-friendly language. The interview questions were also modified from previous studies completed by both Cairns and McClatchy (2013) and Hong et al. (2014) and were assumed to have strong face and content validity prior to modification. Creswell (2013) explained that it is

important that the research represents adequate measures and that it also measures the intended material in order to be considered credible.

Additionally, as suggested by Creswell (2013), the research should represent a broad range of questions. By completing a thorough interview, the attitudes signified on the data collection tools aimed to represent common attitudes that are discussed within the recent research. For example, the questionnaire prompted students to consider helpfulness, frustration, and happiness when working with their peers who have exceptionalities. The identification of specific feelings that may be elicited provides a thorough scale of potential attitudes that students may feel towards their peers who have exceptionalities.

Finally, Creswell (2013) indicated that a study's validity can be strengthened by establishing trust with the participants and ensuring they understand and interpret the questions accurately and seriously. By introducing students to the benefits of the research and providing them with definitions and information regarding the language used, it was hoped that their answers were more likely to be true to their respective attitudes. Rapport and trust also were established with the participants through introduction and discussion of the purpose of the research study and students' data collection experiences prior to beginning the study.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting this research project, ethics clearance was obtained from the Brock University Research Ethics Review Board and the Southern Ontario school board. Creswell (2013) outlined a number of ethical concerns that should be taken into consideration prior to conducting research which have been considered in this proposal.

Creswell (2013) firstly explained that when conducting research that uses human participants, it is essential that the benefits from the study outweigh any negative effects. The only negative effect that is being recognized as a result of this study is related to self-reflection. Upon being prompted to reflect on their actions and experiences interacting with peers who have exceptionalities, some students may have considered actions that have been unfriendly or unkind which may have made them feel upset or uncomfortable. However, as the aim of the research is to improve student experience and explore inclusive classrooms, students were assured that their involvement will ultimately help create better environments for all students.

Creswell (2013) outlined a number of general principles regarding consent, information, and debriefing procedures. All involved students were asked to assent, following parental consent. Students and parents alike were assured that the research was confidential in nature and informed that the only characterizing information revealed were their grade and gender. In addition to the confidential and anonymous considerations taken, participants were also assured that all of the collected and analyzed data would always be stored in a secure location which, as Creswell (2013) explained, assures personal and ethical information protection.

Furthermore, a debriefing tool was developed in case of student discomfort or stress. This tool was intended to assure students that their input was intended to help future students have positive school experiences and, furthermore, that their decision to discontinue participation was acceptable.

Creswell (2013) also noted that upon research completion, a number of ethical considerations should be made when reporting the data, including truthful and accurate

discussion. This was ensured through the process of analyzing the data from both the quantitative and qualitative component. For example, all data from the questionnaire was inputted into the program without omission. The process of reporting the qualitative data was also transparent and the information that was focussed on in the following report is thoroughly explained by the researcher to rationalize the thematic choices.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The study used data from classroom discussions, individual interviews, and questionnaires to formulate conclusions regarding peer attitudes towards students with exceptionalities within one selected school in Southern Ontario. Results are organized by quantitative data from the questionnaires as well as qualitative data from both classroom discussions and interviews.

Quantitative Data (Classroom Questionnaires)

Overall, 26 students (35% of invited students) completed the classroom questionnaire (primary $n=6$, junior $n=4$, intermediate $n=16$), as outlined in Table 2. As the purpose of the questionnaire was to include multiple dimensions of attitudes, results from each division are combined in the following tables organized by attitudinal component.

Students' responses to being asked whether they would enjoy working or playing with a peer who has exceptionalities yielded similar responses (see Table 3), with the majority of students indicating they would often or always enjoy the interaction (play = 57.7%; work = 61.54%). When students were asked to consider more negative affective responses—specifically if they have felt frustrated or annoyed by a peer who has an exceptionality—student responses were similar in regards to both potential emotions (see Figure 2). The majority of students indicated they never or rarely feel frustration or annoyance when interacting with a peer who has an exceptionality (never or rarely frustrated = 69.23%, never or rarely annoyed = 61.54%).

Table 2

Participants Organized by Gender and Division

Division	No. of students		Total no. of students per division
	Female	Male	
Primary	4	2	6
Junior	3	1	4
Intermediate	8	8	16
Total:	15	11	N=26

Table 3

Affective Dimension

Question code	Question	Responses (%)		
		Never or rarely	Sometimes	Often or always
CP1Q1	I enjoy (would enjoy) playing with my peers who have special needs.	3.85	38.46	57.7
CP1Q2	I enjoy (would enjoy) working with my peers who have special needs.	7.69	30.77	61.54
CP1Q5	I have felt frustrated when playing with a peer who has a special need.	69.23	23.08	7.7
CP1Q6	I have felt annoyed by a peer who has a special need.	61.54	30.77	7.7

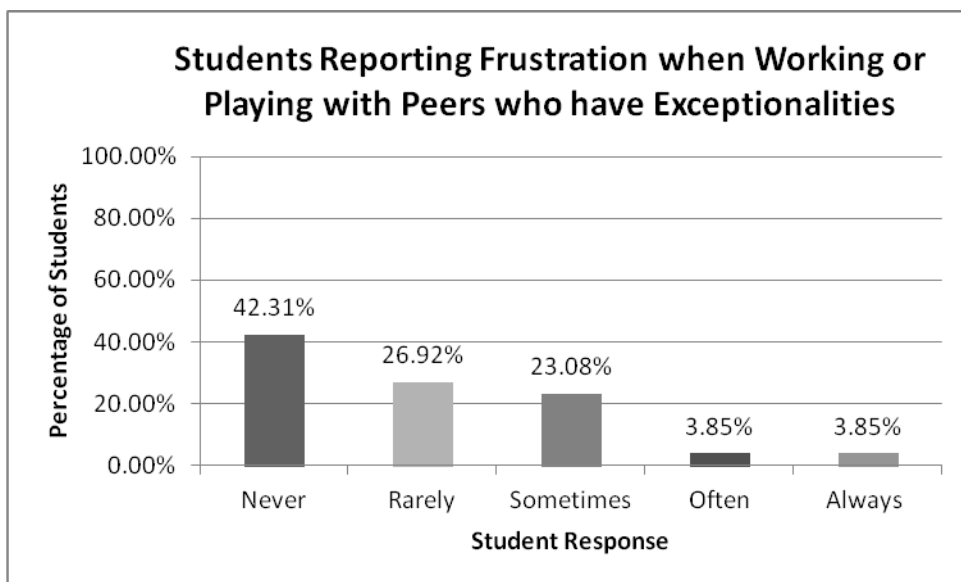


Figure 2. Students reporting frustration.

As students were asked to consider how they think about peers who have exceptionalities, results from the cognitive component of the questionnaire (see Table 4) indicate that not one student felt peers with exceptionalities are unfriendly. Students reported that peers who have exceptionalities are friendly at least sometimes (15.38%), however the majority indicated that they feel peers with exceptionalities are friendly often or always (84.62%). Furthermore, when asked to consider if peers who have exceptionalities share similar interests, the majority of participants (69.23%) stated that often or always they have something in common with peers who have exceptionalities (see Figure 3).

In connection to the behavioural component of attitude (see Table 5), students were asked to consider the actions they would take when presented with a situation where they would be interacting with a peer who had an exceptionality. The majority of students (65.38%) stated they would often or always allow a peer with an exceptionality to play or work with them, and only 3.85% of participating students ($n=1$ participant), stated they would never or rarely allow a peer with an exceptionality to work or play with them (see Figure 4).

The majority of students (73.08%) similarly conveyed that they would not feel uncomfortable if a peer with an exceptionality were to sit near them (see Figure 5). However, when asked if they would initiate a conversation with a peer who had exceptionality, results were more scattered with 26.92% of participants stating they would never or rarely start the conversation and 26.92% stating they would sometimes initiate the conversation. Slightly less than half of the students (46.15%) indicated that they would start a conversation with a peer who had an exceptionality.

Table 4

Cognitive Dimension

Question code	Question	Responses (%)		
		Never or rarely	Sometimes	Often or always
CP1Q3	Students who have special needs are mostly friendly.	0	15.38	84.62
CP1Q4	Students with special needs share similar interests with me.	7.69	23.08	69.23

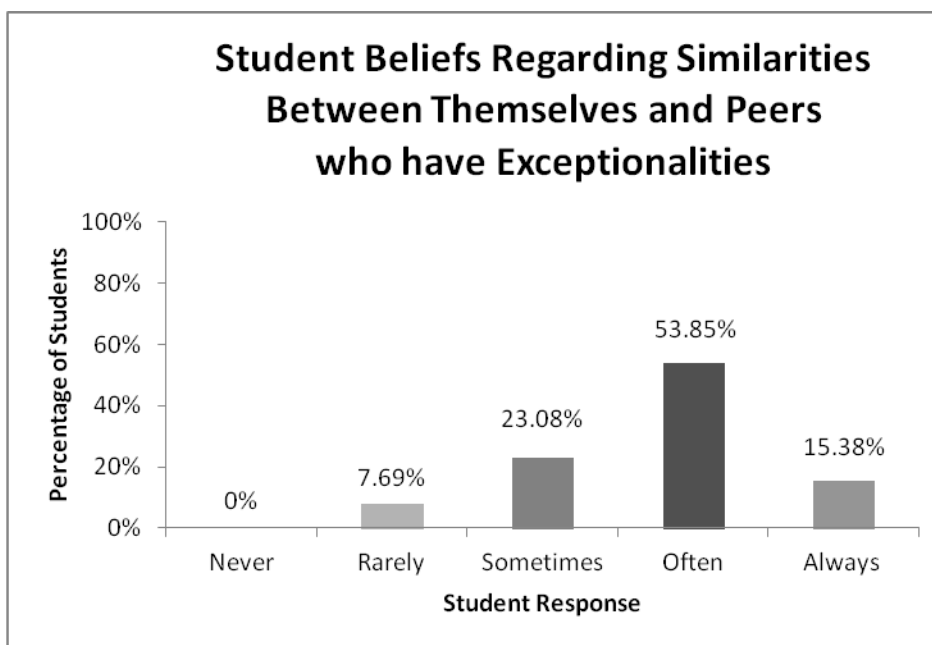


Figure 3. Student beliefs regarding similarities.

Table 5

Behaviour Dimension

Question code	Question	Responses (%)		
		Never or rarely	Sometimes	Often or always
CP1Q7	If a student who has a special need wanted to play or work with me, I would say yes.	3.85	30.77	65.38
CP1Q8	I might feel uncomfortable if a student who has a special need sat near me.	73.08	23.08	3.85
CP1Q9	I would start a conversation with a student who has a special need.	26.92	26.92	46.15

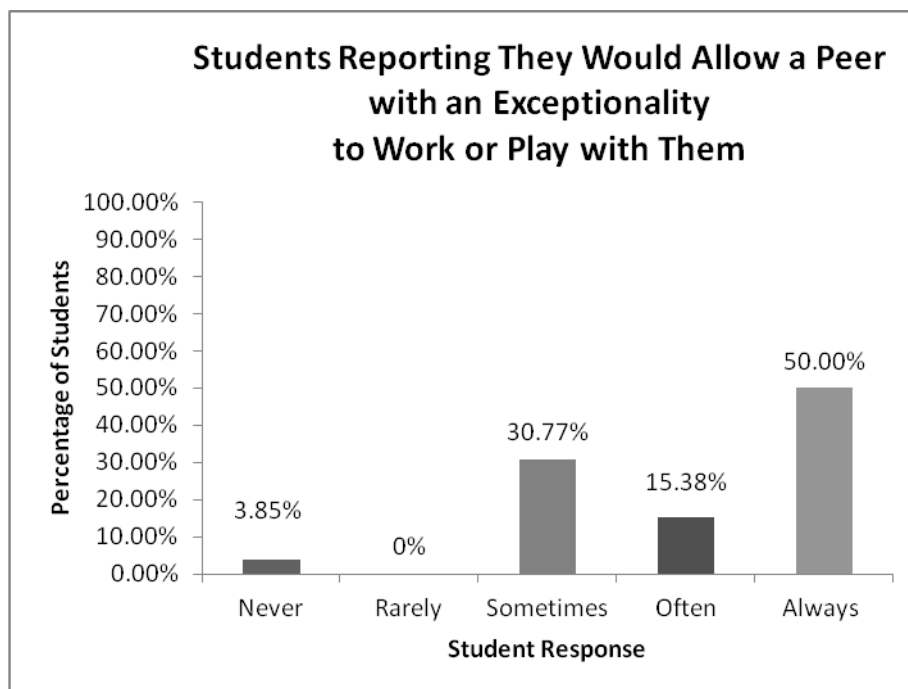


Figure 4. Students reporting whether they would allow a child with an exceptionality to work or play with them.

Divisional Differences

Although data has been combined from all divisions due to sample sizes, a few unique differences did emerge between divisions on two of the questionnaire items which specifically address the first sub-question. When students were asked to indicate if they had friends with exceptionalities, 66% of primary students reported they would often or always had friends with exceptionalities, 50% of junior students reported friends often or always, while only 19% of intermediate students indicated they often or always had friends with exceptionalities.

The other questionnaire item with a variation in divisional responses was regarding whether students would initiate a conversation with a peer who had an exceptionality; 33% of primary students reported they would initiate conversation, 0 juniors indicated they would begin a conversation, and 62% of intermediates responded that they would begin a conversation with a peer who had an exceptionality.

Qualitative Data (Classroom Discussions and Individual Interviews)

Students ($n=26$) that participated in the questionnaire also were present during the classroom discussions or mini lesson ($n= 6$ primary students, $n= 4$ junior students, $n= 16$ intermediate students). Eight students participated within the individual interviews ($n=3$ primary, $n=2$ junior, and $n=3$ intermediate) with an equal split of males and females ($n=4$ boys, $n=4$ girls). Results from the qualitative aspect of the research are discussed in relation to the quantitative data as well as previous research and literature to provide a comprehensive and holistic depiction of the emergent themes consistent with mixed methods research.

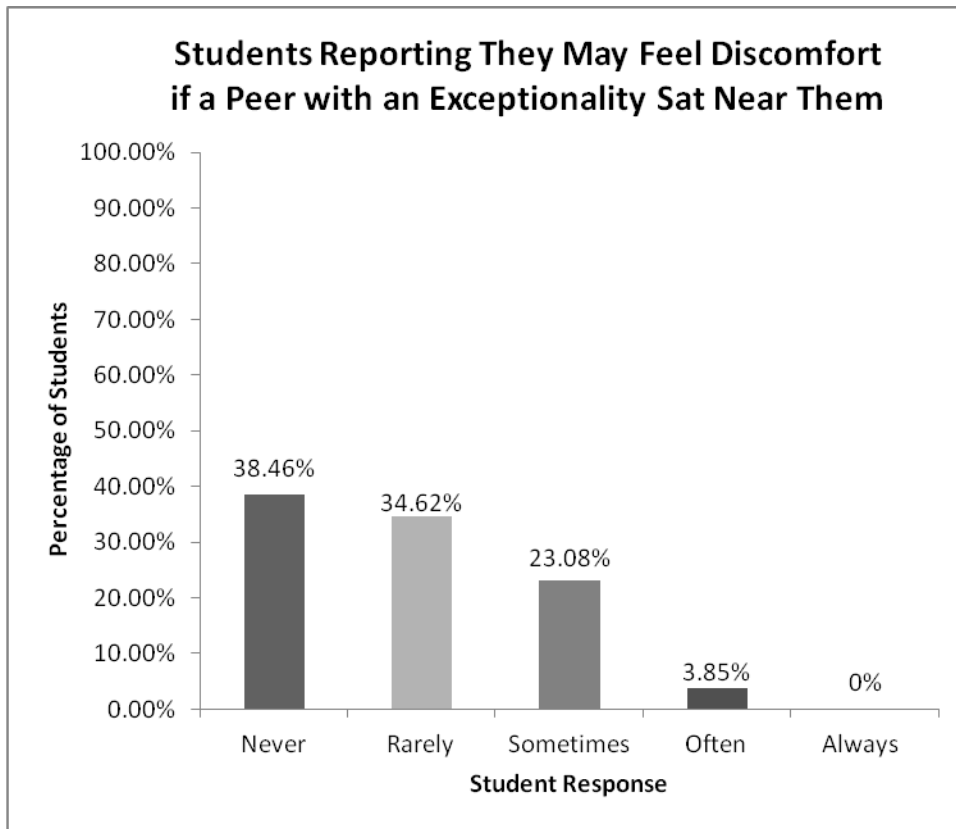


Figure 5. Students reporting potential discomfort sitting near a peer with an exceptionality.

Student Knowledge of Exceptionalities

Previous research indicated that student attitudes are often formed as result of interactions and early experiences which can be influenced and moulded through modelling or explicit teaching (Hodkinson, 2007; Hong et al., 2014; Krahe & Altwasser, 2006). Research has also illustrated how children with prior experience interacting with individuals who have exceptionalities are more likely to display inclusive behaviours due to an increased understanding of difference (Hong et al., 2014; MacMillan et al., 2014). It is therefore evident that a relationship exists between inclusion, knowledge of exceptionalities, and positive attitudes towards individuals who have exceptionalities.

Within this study, 73% of participating students reported that they have had previous experience working or playing with peers who have exceptionalities. However, students discussed a somewhat narrow understanding of what they perceived to be categorized as an exceptionality. As students were prompted to consider what they knew about individuals who had exceptionalities, the vast majority of them discussed experiences or understandings related to those with a physical exceptionality including comments that “people with wheelchairs” (primary student) and people who are “blind or deaf” (intermediate student) have exceptionalities. One intermediate student shared their experience at school indicating that a peer “couldn’t stand up. [They] had to use this thing if [they] wanted to go outside...it helps [them walk].” These understandings are consistent with previous literature which suggests that children more easily recognize and label physical exceptionalities as they are often associated with adaptive equipment such as wheelchairs or walkers (Hodkinson, 2007; Hong et al., 2014). Within both classroom discussions and interviews, students referenced a variety of adaptive equipment such as

computers, wheelchairs, and communication apps with one intermediate student specifically indicating that a peer “couldn’t talk so they had to use a board and [they] had to...point with [their] eyes.” It is possible that these physical characteristics impacted students’ considerations of allowing a peer with an exceptionality to work or play with them.

Almost one-third (30.77%) of students indicated they only sometimes would permit a peer with an exceptionality to work or play with them, with one intermediate student specifically explaining that “[They] wouldn’t be able to kick the ball as hard or run as much as we could.” This overarching idea of students with exceptionalities having different physical ? abilities was evident throughout the qualitative components of this research.

Students Associate Disability With Difference

As students considered what it may be like to work or play with a peer who had an exceptionality, difference emerged as a theme. Participating students commented that peers who have exceptionalities “do stuff differently” (junior student), “think differently” (intermediate student), “study at a different pace” (intermediate student), and concomitantly “are different from us” (junior student). The impression that students who have exceptionalities are different has the potential to foster negative experiences for children with exceptionalities through the process of othering (Hodkinson, 2007; Oliver, 1990). Oliver (1990) proposed that if individuals perceive difference in people with exceptionalities only, they are more likely to view them as an atypical group which can lead to isolation or rejection. Within this research, students specifically commented that peers with exceptionalities would not be able to participate in the same activities, would

not have the same learning capabilities, and may require additional support. It is interesting to note their emphasis on differences as participating students were nominated by their respective teachers who believed that these students would have positive inclusive experiences. Although they shared positive memories, students clearly discussed how their interactions with peers who have exceptionalities were different than those with their other peers. These findings are similar to conclusions drawn from Hodkinson's (2007) research which indicated that students thought their peers with exceptionalities had different levels of intelligence and needed additional support in daily activities.

Ability to participate. As students considered what it may be like to participate in a school club or play on a team with a peer who had an exceptionality, students within each school division commented on the difficulties that may arise. A student from the junior division explained that "They can't do certain things, certain sports, and subjects in school," while a primary student suggested that their participation might "[make] it kind of hard to win." Additionally, a student in the intermediate division explained that if a student with an exceptionality were to play on their team, "[They] wouldn't have the same abilities as us."

As suggested earlier, these perceived differences in a student with an exceptionality's ability to participate may have influenced the results on the questionnaire in regards to whether or not students would allow a peer with an exceptionality to work or play with them. Hodkinson (2007) found that students as young as 4 years old often preferred friends who were able-bodied, indicating a clear knowledge of existing difference. Furthermore, Hong et al. (2014) suggested that exceptionalities may

specifically influence inclusive decisions when a specific skill set is involved. As participating students discussed playing sports or partaking in school clubs with a peer who had an exceptionality, it is likely they were recalling their knowledge and understanding that many people with exceptionalities have physical limitations or differences. Regardless, the majority of students (65%) indicated that would often or always allow a peer with an exceptionality to work or play with them.

Learning capabilities. In addition to differences that may impact physical participation, students also indicated a belief that peers with exceptionalities may not have the same learning abilities. During the interviews, students commented on general differences in both knowledge and understanding. For example, when discussing what it would be like to play a sport with a peer who had an exceptionality, an intermediate student suggested that “It would be difficult to make them understand how you play.” During class discussion, a junior student commented on the stagnancy of exceptionalities when asked what they knew about children with exceptionalities, suggesting that peers with exceptionalities “won’t learn anything when they grow up.”

Similarities can be found between participating students and students in Litvak et al.’s (2011) study who commented on the ways learning experiences in school changed when students with exceptionalities were present. However, in contrast to Litvak et al.’s findings, not one participating student from this research project indicated that a student’s exceptionality would impact their personal learning environment negatively. Students in Litvak et al.’s study commented on having to wait, becoming bored, being interrupted, and not being able to learn at the appropriate level, with 50% of students indicating they learned less while in a classroom with a peer who had an exceptionality. This level of

frustration was not shared by participating students in this research project on peer attitudes as 69% responded that they have rarely or never felt frustrated when interacting with a peer who has an exceptionality.

Additional support. As students discussed differences in participation and learning capabilities, some students indicated that these differences were related to a need for additional support. For example, during the intermediate classroom discussion as students initially brainstormed what they knew about exceptionalities, one student commented that peers who have exceptionalities “need more attention,” while another student added that this is because “they may learn at a ... slower pace.” These comments are consistent with previous research on student attitudes and inclusion which indicated that students felt as though peers with exceptionalities would be supported by the teacher or another paraprofessional (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Litvak et al., 2011). It is possible that these observations relate to students’ personal experiences, as throughout each division, comments on the presence of supporting educators were shared.

Interestingly enough, although students commented on differences related to participation, learning, and a need for additional support, very few implications or experiences of these differences such as rejection or exclusion were discussed by students. The final interview question prompted students to consider the importance of inclusion which generated discussion surrounding the reasons why they would not exclude a peer (e.g., not wanting them to feel sad), however only one comment related to an experience of this type of exclusion occurring. This is an essential finding to highlight in connection to the theoretical framework utilized. Specifically, in relation to the Social Model of Disability as outlined by Scior et al. (2013), it is explained that when

individuals are labelled or recognized as being different or *exceptional*, there is an increased likelihood that they will be evaluated negatively or discriminated against. Davis (1997) further explained that these negative occurrences are correlated with student perceptions of isolation and rejection over time. Although participating students clearly shared their understanding of difference, these students were also able to identify a number of similarities between themselves and peers with exceptionalities which may act as a protective factor against rejection or isolation. Similarly, Hodkinson (2007) emphasized the importance of student attitudes and perceptions regarding difference as a direct impact on inclusion and integration. Participating students' positive comments on similarities and memories that they shared with their peers who have exceptionalities may relate to their willingness to support and help peers who have exceptionalities, although there is also evidence from the data suggesting that students feel sympathetic towards peers with differing abilities.

Student Compassion Generates Helpful Attitudes and Behaviours

While investigating student understandings and attitudes towards exceptionalities, many students referred to adult support. One junior student commented that a peer they knew "[is] always with a teacher," and when being asked how they could help a friend with an exceptionality, numerous students simply suggested they would help by getting adult support. This is similar to previous research findings in which students have commented that teachers are always there to help students who have exceptionalities (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Litvak et al., 2011). This gravitation towards adult support and a lack of perceived independence may be related to expressions of compassion by some participating students. For example, one intermediate student referred to a peer with

an exceptionality, stating that he “kinda [felt] bad for her and her family...she goes on a different bus.” Another intermediate student referred to challenging social situations, saying that “they usually got bullied for being different. And that always made me feel bad because they didn’t ask to be that way. And I always tried hanging with them so they [didn’t] feel alone.” This is significant because many students seemed to have a similar understanding of potentially challenging social situations, referencing bullying and the potential of being alone. In addition to the recognition and empathetic comments regarding these issues, students were also able to share a variety of ways they could support students with exceptionalities, however the motivating factors behind student willingness and the drive to help their peers with exceptionalities is debatable and will be further discussed.

In addition to getting adult support, many students suggested specific classroom strategies and academic support that they could personally offer to peers with exceptionalities. This is an important finding as it illustrates peer support without the implementation of a formalized program. Mallabar (2016) outlined the success of peer support in the classroom explaining that in comparison to adult support, children with exceptionalities may feel an increased sense of belonging and benefit from the experience of social interaction with same-aged peers. The suggestions of ways in which students felt they could support their peers with exceptionalities is comparable to results from Cairns and McClatchey’s (2013) research project in which students reported offering social, academic, and general assistance strategies to help foster inclusive classrooms.

Specific strategies and accommodations. Participating intermediate students discussed ways that they could simplify communication for students with

exceptionalities, including “drawing [it] out” and “[putting] it into smaller words.” One intermediate student specifically proposed that “if [a student were] deaf, I would probably just type it out, or write it out for them.” One student even referred to using adaptive equipment, explaining that “if there was something in language, I would [use the] iPad ... and use Google Translate.” These positive suggestions show that elementary students are thinking about inclusion and can contribute to the reality of an inclusive classroom environment.

Academic support. Furthermore, students throughout each school division also discussed ways in which they could help students with exceptionalities academically. A primary student suggested that they could “maybe help them with their work if they needed some help, maybe like math or writing,” while a student from the junior division indicated that if a peer with an exceptionality were “reading a book and they didn’t know how to read, I’ll help them.”

This variety and number of suggestions that students were able to develop in response to the question, “If a student with a special need required help, how could you help him or her?” could relate to Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, which emphasized that exposure to difference improves attitudes by increasing understanding and developing empathetic tendencies (as cited in Krahe & Altwasser, 2006). This theory is widely referenced within Krahe and Altwasser’s (2006) study using a cognitive-behavioural intervention. The finding that 73% of participating students had previous experience with individuals who have exceptionalities could help explain the helpful attitudes and conversations documented. However, it is important to consider if these

helpful attitudes are related to feelings of compassion and the potentially corresponding relationship to the evidence of inclusive attitudes noted throughout each school division.

Caring Tendencies Foster Inclusion

As discussed throughout this research and in previous inclusion studies, there is a great discrepancy surrounding the attitudes held by children towards their peers with exceptionalities. Research within the last 15 years has yielded conflicting results, with some studies indicating negative attitudinal responses such as annoyance or frustration towards peers with exceptionalities (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Cameron, 2014; Ekah & Oladayo, 2013), while other studies reported empathetic, helpful, and friendly attitudes (Brock et al., 2015; Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Krahe & Altwasser, 2006; Litvak et al., 2011) correlating with more diverse and accepting school environments. Initially, within this research project, students' understanding of exceptionalities seemed to relate to more negative understandings such as less capabilities, requirements of support, and feelings of necessary compassion towards those with exceptionalities. However, upon deeper investigation, overall student attitudes indicated helpful, friendly, and inclusive responses.

When students were asked how often they feel friendly when interacting with a peer who has an exceptionality on the questionnaire, 100% of students indicated that they feel friendly most of the time or always when working or playing with peers who have exceptionalities. Additionally, 80% of participating students reported feeling happy when working or playing with a peer who has an exceptionality. These reported attitudes could stem from previous student experiences, as many students during the interviews were able to share a story of a time they've had a great experience with a peer who has an

exceptionality. Multiple examples of recreational memories were discussed by students within each school division, including skateboarding, playing video games, playing outdoors, playing tag, and playing sports. Interestingly, many students made reference to the physical activities that they engaged in with peers who have exceptionalities despite previously noting that they felt exceptionalities may be a barrier to participation. This contradiction may be related to more competitive play as many students mentioned having to stop and teach skills or the impact on their chances of winning. It is possible that this discussion regarding mutual participation in leisure activities is related to recollection and understanding of similar interests which is relative to Youniss's (1980) findings that children are more likely to form friendships with children who share similar qualities. Historically, this may have excluded children with exceptionalities, however due to inclusion movements and attitudinal shifts, more students are interacting with peers who have exceptionalities on a daily basis. Brock et al. (2015) also indicated that by increasing opportunities for positive and inclusive experiences, it is more likely that students will develop more accepting and inclusive attitudes.

This study's findings align with the proposed development of positive attitudes as discussed by Hodkinson (2007) who explained that when students understand their peers, fewer negative responses will occur. Cairns and McClatchey (2013) furthered this claim in their research noting that inclusive classrooms foster empathetic development and reduce anxiety of the unfamiliar. Therefore, the positive interactions that students recalled within this study may be reflective of the development of positive and inclusive attitudes.

Students share the importance of inclusion. When asked why they felt that it was important to include all of their friends in the classroom or within recreational

activities, a large majority of students commented that they didn't want anyone to feel left out, alone, or sad. One student from the junior division sympathetically commented that "[students with exceptionalities] wouldn't want to get left out, cause then they would get sad," while referring to how students may feel if they were not included. These comments indicate their rationale for their attitudes as students communicate that inclusive attitudes and inclusion are simply necessary. With further reference to the researcher's second sub-question, one intermediate student justified their inclusive attitude by concluding that "everyone should be accepted, even with special needs." Students therefore specifically indicate that they promote inclusion because they do not want their peers to feel sad or excluded. One student expressed a great deal of pride in his own inclusion efforts, commenting that "people with special needs like to play sports... and it would make me proud that I actually did a good deed to someone that wants to play but doesn't know how to." This discussion surrounding inclusion efforts is relatively consistent with results from the questionnaire, where only one student responded they would not allow a peer with an exceptionality to work or play with them. Furthermore, these answers are somewhat similar to responses from Hodkinson's (2007) work where students were asked to provide reasons for allowing peers with exceptionalities into their classroom. Students in Hodkinson's study indicated that it was important for them to make friends, and also that it would not be fair if they did not allow peers with exceptionalities into the classroom.

These findings prompt further discussion, however, on the motivating factors behind the unanimous support for inclusive practices in the final interview question. As the students responded that they don't want others to feel left out, that they feel pride

when including individuals with exceptionalities, and that they feel bad that some students had these differences, one must consider if these inclusive attitudes are reflective of students' perceived obligation to do good or a genuinely empathetic nature. Their compassion seemed to be indicative of a charity-based approach rather than the current understanding of individuals with exceptionalities which is related to rights-based initiatives and views (Kanter, 2015).

Divisional Differences

Results from each school division have been integrated to illustrate the commonalities found and the themes developed throughout data triangulation. Unique differences in qualitative student commentary were not evident between school divisions except for additional elaboration provided by the intermediate students—most likely a result of their maturity, experiences, and age.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore students' attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities within the context of one inclusive school's environment. Through multiple analyses of three independent data sources (questionnaires, classroom discussions, and individual interviews), various reports of student attitudes were explored. Based on these multiple analyses (quantitative and qualitative), the emergent attitudes of 27 students were discussed in relation to previous research and a need for continued research.

Referring back to the theoretical and methodological framework utilized within this research study which combined elements of Symbolic Interactionism, the Social Model of Disability, and Appreciative Inquiry, a number of positive conclusions can be commented upon. It is essential that we recognize in both disability and educational fields that inclusive settings do not guarantee feelings of inclusion. Individuals consistently comment that they experience feelings of isolation or rejection despite being physically included in various settings (Smith-D'Arezo, & Moore-Thomas, 2010). However, as reported by participants within this study, inclusion seems to be a value within this particular school, and students suggest very specific ways in which they observe inclusion, experience inclusion themselves, and support the implementation of inclusive practices. This is an integral component of disability research, specifically the Social Model of Disability framework, as attitudes are often perpetuated throughout time and individuals often continue to experience similar treatment by their peers and colleagues (Scior et al., 2013). However, from this study we learned that although students referred to the differences between themselves and peers who have exceptionalities, they also

communicated ways they supported these peers and shared positive memories and experiences that they had with these peers. Although some of the comments students made with regard to feeling sympathetic to their peers with exceptionalities seemed to reflect a charity-based view and are still not ideal of an entirely inclusive environment, their overall attitudes represented strides in the right direction as they communicated their inclusive values and views. These values represented a much more preferable attitude to be perpetuated as opposed to ones that foster feelings of rejection or isolation.

Connections to Framework

Knowing that students are inevitably impacted by the attitudes of those around them (Handberg et al., 2014) could mean that students in this particular school are having positive experiences with their peers as they voiced the necessity of ensuring their inclusion throughout the study. The Symbolic Interactionist Framework emphasizes this aspect of social environments outlining how actions, attitudes, and experiences have an impact on each individual within a societal context. If students are in fact supporting their peers who have exceptionalities, playing and working with them, or ensuring they are not excluded as mentioned in the majority of individual interviews, it is more likely that students with exceptionalities are having a positive school experience.

Noting these seemingly progressive conclusions, connection to the Appreciative Inquiry Framework component of this research project is effortless. From this specific study, one may assume that inclusion efforts are in their preliminary stages, effective. Hennessey and Hughes (2014) advised that AI approaches should outline what is already working and students within this study *are* showing positive attitudes. The willingness to support student learning is a positive aspect that has emerged from the research, and in

addition, the stories students are sharing show empathy and an understanding that every child is entitled to be a part of the classroom. However, despite these positive conclusions, AI approaches are also built on the understanding that problematic findings and the potential for change should not be neglected (Hennessey & Hughes, 2014).

It is potentially problematic that students communicated an understanding that their peers who have exceptionalities may be less able to participate in terms of ensuring a truly inclusive environment. If students perceive their peers as unable to partake in an activity, they may not put forth the effort to ensure their participation, which could result in unintentional othering. Fortunately, children's attitudes are malleable (Godeau et al., 2010; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013) and this should be taken into consideration by educators as discussed within the implications of the research and future directions.

Implications

The implications from this research can be used in diverse ways by schools, educators, and students. Understanding that students value an inclusive community, that they communicate their ability to include peers of all strengths and needs, and that they are aware of their experiences with peers who have exceptionalities is a remarkably powerful foundation for inclusion.

Schools

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) emphasizes equal opportunities for all students and stresses a removal of barriers related to inclusion in its *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy Guide*. Schools in Ontario are striving to achieve communities in which all of their students thrive and feel a sense of belonging. Bennett (2009) further emphasized that inclusion requires

active involvement and participation of administrators and educators alike. Therefore, adequate resources, professional development, support, and services must be available to generate inclusive school environments (Bennett, 2009). This research provides a snapshot of how students are currently impacting these goals and efforts. If schools can take away the understanding that students want to support the development of an inclusive community, they can strive to ensure they are providing consistent opportunities for inclusion. It is obvious from the research that students have preliminary knowledge of ways they can support students with diverse abilities, strengths, and needs, and it is important that school environments provide opportunities to these students to utilize their knowledge. As an occasional teacher, I am gifted with the unique opportunity to learn about many schools' movement towards more inclusive practices and strategies. For example, one of the schools I frequently visit has a program in which students in the junior division spend two class periods each week in the special education classroom. Students work on reading, math activities, creative arts, and play-based activities with the students. Programs such as these allow students to engage, learn, and have fun with peers who have exceptionalities at their school.

Teachers

Specifically, within their classrooms, teachers can take advantage of their students' willingness to help others in a variety of ways. Although some classrooms may have EA support, students within the research were communicating their own ability to help peers with exceptionalities. Teachers can support this by encouraging their students to work with peers who may be struggling. As previously discussed, peer-mediated programs thrive on the idea of students helping students and the benefits of peer support

over adult support. Interestingly enough, many Ontario schools align their classrooms using the Tribes Learning Community program that focuses on four classroom agreements, including mutual respect. Teachers can encourage students to live by this agreement in their classroom by providing students with opportunities to support each other's involvement in the classroom community.

However, despite student eagerness to help peers with exceptionalities, it is also important that educators consider the finding that students are associating disability with difference. Students commented throughout the study that their peers with exceptionalities may not be able to do things as well. It is essential that teachers find ways in their classroom to empower each and every student and to educate their students to support them in understanding that difference does not mean less or unable. One way teachers can do this is by aligning their practices with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI) planning approaches (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

UDL approaches are centred around equitable use (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) which may include flexibility in environmental design. Teachers have the responsibility to ensure the environment is conducive to all student needs, which may include having safe spaces, access to fidget toys, or calming strategies in place to ensure student comfort and success. Implementing the appropriate supports within the classroom can also reduce the potential barriers or challenges a student with an exceptionality may face in the classroom. Furthermore, Ontario teachers are required to implement DI approaches, which includes differentiating their instruction to ensure that every student has the opportunity to work within their own unique strengths and abilities (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2013). The implementation of UDL and DI approaches in the classroom ultimately create an environment in which all students can see that differences are celebrated and that each student has varying strengths within the classroom.

It is also important that educators are aware that inconsistent response patterns of attitudinal studies with students throughout the years may related to educational experiences. Gomez-Zepeda, Petrenas, Sabando, and Puigdemellviol (2017) referenced the importance of educator collaboration in their work as they discussed the implementation of adequate supports for students with exceptionalities in the classroom. Educators are responsible for breaking down the potential barriers that exist for students within their classrooms to help foster inclusive environments, which includes providing additional resources and support (Gomez-Zepeda et al., 2017) such as accommodations, technology, and other behavioural/transitional strategies to ensure that each student has an equal opportunity for success. Educators who provide adequate supports for all of their students demonstrate their commitment to student success and an overall inclusive attitude which is reflected in their practice. Students who work with these types of educators may be more likely to demonstrate inclusive attitudes, as the latter are often formed early within common environments and with individuals they frequently interact with (Hong et al., 2014).

Specifically, this study's student participants were prompted to think of positive memories or similarities they share with peers who have exceptionalities during the interview component; likewise, teachers can use a direct approach such as social stories or discussion activities to expand their students understanding in a positive light surrounding exceptionalities. Some teachers may also choose to employ buddy systems or peer programs to support the development of positive relationships within their classroom.

Students

The implications of this research on students specifically revolves around the idea that conversations regarding those with exceptionalities through an appreciate inquiry lens provides them with the opportunity to reflect on the positive aspects of difference and inclusion. Students throughout the study considered positive experiences they have had with peers who have exceptionalities and ultimately students have the strongest impact on the creation of an inclusive classroom or school environment. It might be interesting to share this research with students in other classrooms to help outline views that students within one school had towards peers with exceptionalities. This may prompt students to consider their own views and may encourage them to learn more.

Future Directions

Although it appears that inclusion is an inevitable component of today's classrooms, it is crucial that we remember physical integration does not necessarily equate to a truly inclusive experience for all students (de Boer et al., 2012; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013; Malins, 2016). From this research, we get a snapshot of the level of inclusivity that may be occurring in one school in Southern Ontario. We can see that students support the idea of inclusion through their willingness to play and work together, as well as their conversations regarding the necessity of involving everyone. However, absent from this research is concrete behavioural evidence that students are actually inviting their peers with exceptionalities to contribute to work and play. Behaviour is a crucial component of attitude and, from this project, we cannot be sure if their positive statements are reflective of their actions. Future research therefore may strive to observe students in inclusive classrooms, which would allow researchers to document the

conversations and interactions occurring between students and their peers who have exceptionalities.

Furthermore, as students in the past have reported feeling victimized by peers at school (Son et al., 2012), future research should seek to question students with exceptionalities. A research project aimed at gathering the lived experiences of students with exceptionalities would be a valuable contribution to the field of inclusion given that students would be able to report their perception of peers' attitudes and behaviours towards them. This type of research would also be valuable to schools, teachers, and students alike as they would be given the opportunity to see the effectiveness of their inclusion efforts. Consideration should be made with this type of project to incorporate the various communication styles that students with exceptionalities may have in order to gain a holistic view.

Conclusion

Overall, this research provides insight regarding student attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities. Specifically, through this snapshot of one school in Southern Ontario, it has been learned that many students share a helpful and inclusive outlook regarding working and playing with their peers who have exceptionalities. Due to the impact that negative attitudes can have on students with exceptionalities and inclusion efforts as a whole (Blumer, 1969; Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Hodkinson, 2007), this thesis provides important information regarding student attitudes. Previous research indicated an inconsistency in specific student attitudes ranging from negative feelings of annoyance and frustration to positive feelings such as empathy and helpfulness. This

research project adds to the literature by including a thorough outlook from all divisions within one school.

Furthermore, much room for future research regarding actual behaviour and perceptions of students with exceptionalities would benefit this field significantly. This information benefits schools, teachers, and students as they work together to provide the best environment for all students.

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Appendix A

Brock University Research Ethics Board Approval



Brock University
Research Ethics Office
Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035
Email: reb@brocku.ca

Social Science Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

DATE: 5/3/2016
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: MAICH, Kimberly - Teacher Education
FILE: 15-222 - MAICH
TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project STUDENT: Megan Henning
SUPERVISOR: Kimberly Maich
TITLE: Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom

ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Type of Clearance: NEW

Expiry Date: 5/31/2017

The Brock University Social Science Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from 5/3/2016 to 5/31/2017.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before 5/31/2017. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page at <http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms>.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

- a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
- c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
- d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

Sandra Peters, Acting Chair
Social Science Research Ethics Board

Note: Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.

Appendix B

Informal Teacher Invitation Letter



Hello [omitted] Faculty,

My name is Megan Henning and I am a Graduate Student in the Department of Education at Brock University. I am looking to invite three classrooms to participate in a research project entitled, *Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom* this fall.

The purpose of this research is to learn more about students' attitudes within inclusive classroom settings. I am looking for one classroom from each division (Primary, Junior, and Intermediate) to participate. Should you choose to participate, students will be asked to partake in a brief lesson regarding exceptionalities, complete a questionnaire, and additionally may be selected to participate in a short interview regarding their experiences within an inclusive classroom. All students, including any students who may have exceptionalities will be welcome to participate.

The maximum time required from your classroom would be a total of 50 minutes.

- Classroom lesson including discussion (20 Minutes)
- Questionnaire regarding attitudes and experiences (20 Minutes)
- Interview for those selected (10 Minutes)

Please speak to [omitted principal's name] if you would consider having your classroom partake in this study.

Thank you for your consideration,

Megan Henning, OCT, MEd Candidate

Appendix C

Formal Teacher Invitation Letter



[October 1, 2016]

Title of Study: Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom

Principal Student Investigator: Megan Henning, M.Ed. Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Brock University

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Kimberly Maich, Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Brock University

I, Megan Henning, Graduate Student from the Department of Education at Brock University, would like to invite your classroom to participate in a research project entitled Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom.

The purpose of this research project is to further knowledge and understanding regarding inclusive classroom settings by investigating student attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities. Should you choose to participate, students will be asked to partake in a brief audio-recorded lesson encouraging discussion regarding their existing knowledge of exceptionalities which will integrate the use of social stories and picture collages, complete a questionnaire regarding their attitudes and experiences in an inclusive classroom setting, and additionally may be selected to participate in a short interview where they will be asked to elaborate upon their experiences. Experienced educational researcher, Dr. Kimberly Maich will also be present during data collection should any difficulties arise.

The expected duration of the brief lesson is 20 minutes, the questionnaire is expected to take approximately 20 minutes and if selected to participate in an interview, interviews may take an additional 10 minutes. The maximum total time required from your classroom is approximately 50 minutes. All students are welcome to participate, including any students who may have exceptionalities.

This research should benefit social and educational research fields and furthermore, help to provide a more cohesive understanding of inclusive classrooms and the attitudes that exist within them. The only potential risk associated with this study is regarding potentially uncomfortable feelings that may arise if students recall times where they may

have been unkind to peers. However students will be reminded throughout their participation that their involvement is helping us learn about ways to promote positive educational experiences for all students.

Please find attached the lesson plan that will be used as an introductory piece to this research project and

if you have any pertinent questions about your students' rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Office (905 688-5550 ext 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you are interested in having your classroom participate in the described study or should you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Megan Henning (Graduate Student)

mh09dg@brocku.ca

Dr. Kimberly Maich (Assistant Professor)

kmaich@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [15-222 - MAICH] and additionally has received approval from the HWCDSB Research Ethics Board.

Appendix D

Parent Invitation Letter



[October 1, 2016]

Title of Study: Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom

Principal Student Investigator: Megan Henning, M.Ed. Graduate Student, Faculty of Education, Brock University

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Kimberly Maich, Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Brock University

I, Megan Henning, Graduate Student from the Department of Education at Brock University, would like to invite your child(ren) to participate in a research project entitled Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom.

The purpose of this research project is to further knowledge and understanding regarding inclusive classroom settings by investigating student attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities. Should your child(ren) choose to participate, they will be asked to participate in a brief lesson where they will be read social stories about children who have exceptionalities and discuss their existing understanding of students who have exceptionalities through the use of picture collages. This discussion will be audio recorded for the researcher to access at a later date. They will then complete a questionnaire regarding their attitudes and experiences in an inclusive classroom setting, and additionally may be selected to participate in a short audio recorded interview where they will be asked to elaborate upon their experiences. You will be informed if they are selected. Experienced educational researcher, Dr. Kimberly Maich will also be present during data collection should any difficulties arise.

The expected duration of the brief lesson is 20 minutes, the questionnaire is expected to take approximately 20 minutes and if selected to participate in an interview, interviews may take an additional 10 minutes. Therefore the maximum amount of time required from your child will be approximately 50 minutes.

This research should benefit social and educational research fields and furthermore, help to provide a more cohesive understanding of inclusive classrooms and the attitudes that

exist within them. The only potential risk associated with this study is regarding potentially uncomfortable feelings that may arise if students recall times where they may have been unkind to peers. However, throughout the study, students will be reminded that their participation is helping to foster positive classroom environments for all students. If you decide to decline participation in this study, your child's classroom teacher will provide an alternative curriculum based activity for your child to participate within while the indicated research lesson occurs.

If you have any pertinent questions about your student's rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Office (905 688-5550 ext 3035, reb@brocku.ca) If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Megan Henning

Graduate Student

mh09dg@brocku.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [15-222 - MAICH] and has additionally has received approval from the HWCDSB Research Ethics Board.

Appendix E
Parent Consent Form



[October 1, 2016]

Project Title: Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom

Principal Student Investigator (PI):

Megan Henning

Graduate Student

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies / Faculty of Education

Brock University

Mh09dg@brocku.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Kimberly Maich

Professor, Research Supervisor

Department of Teacher Education

Brock University

(905) 688-5550 Ext. 4716

kmaich@brocku.ca

INVITATION

Your child has been invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to further knowledge and understanding regarding inclusive classroom settings by investigating student attitudes towards their peers who have exceptionalities. Your child has also been provided with an assent form providing them with information regarding the described study. Please read through the form with them at home.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

As a participant, your child will be asked to participate in a classroom lesson which will consist of being read stories about students with exceptionalities within inclusive classrooms, viewing a picture collage, and additionally engaging in a discussion where students can share their existing knowledge regarding exceptionalities. This discussion will be audio-recorded. Following this 20 minute lesson, students will be asked to participate in a questionnaire which will require an additional 20 minutes of their time. Following the questionnaire, some students will be selected by their teacher to participate in a brief 10 minute interview where they will be asked to elaborate on their experiences with their peers in their classroom. Students may be selected for these interviews based on their commitment to positive and inclusive classrooms as well as comfort sharing their experiences and understanding. The overall time commitment for your child will therefore be a maximum of approximately 50 minutes. Experienced educational researcher, Dr. Kimberly Maich will also be present during data collection should any difficulties arise. These brief interviews will be recorded using an audio recording application, however these records will only be kept for a short period of time during which the audio recordings will be transcribed to text. All audio records will be deleted immediately after transcription. Students who do not participate within the study will be provided with an alternative curriculum-based activity from their classroom teacher.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

Possible benefits of your student's participation include:

- Advancement in the social and educational research fields
- Increased understanding of inclusive classroom settings which may work to assist in the development of future classroom strategies to promote empathy and understanding
- Students may benefit knowing that their involvement can help improve classroom experiences for all students. They will also benefit from sharing existing knowledge with their peers.

There also may be risks associated with participation:

- Upon being asked to reflect on their actions and experiences interacting with their peers who have exceptionalities, students may recall actions that have been unfriendly which may make them feel upset or uncomfortable.

As the purpose of the research is to improve student experience and explore inclusive classrooms, students will be assured that their involvement will ultimately help create a better environment for all students. However, if students become visibly upset or uncomfortable at any point during the research, they will be asked if they would like

to leave the study without any repercussion. If they choose to leave the study, they will be debriefed individually about their participation.

It is important for you to know that we do not want to create a situation where peers are speaking about other peers; therefore, we will be asking students to think about children or adults they may know outside of the school for the purpose of classroom discussion. We will also be including fictional characters as part of the social story read during our mini-lesson in order to deter conversation from a focus on peers.

All information provided throughout this study will be treated as confidential; student names will not be included or, in any other way, associated with the data reported in the study. The only identifier that will be included within the data report is the grade level of students.

If during the interview, a student discloses a peer's name, the name will be immediately omitted from the interview transcription and data.

Furthermore, the name of the school will be omitted from the reports following the study.

Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked firebox. Data will be kept for a maximum of 8 weeks after which time all original questionnaires and interview transcriptions will be destroyed. From that point, data will only exist on the online program Dedoose which will be utilized for data analysis. Any electronic data (i.e. audio records) will also be uploaded to Dedoose (a secure online program; see www.dedoose.com). Access to this data will be password restricted to the principal student investigator and faculty supervisor as necessary.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to have your child participate in the lesson, questionnaire, interview, or to participate in any component of the study. Further, your child may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty. If they choose to withdraw after completing any portion of the study, existing data they have provided in questionnaire or interview format will be destroyed. Please note that if your child withdraws from the research, statements made within the open discussion period would be retained as it would be difficult to identify and isolate your child's statement and voice within the group conversation.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Participants and their parents will receive a summary of results within six months following the completion of the study. Additional Feedback about this study will

be available following data publication in the summer of 2017 by contacting the Student Principal Researcher, Megan Henning.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact either Megan Henning or Dr. Kimberly Maich using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [15-222 – MAICH] as well as the HWCDSB Research Ethics Board. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records

CONSENT FORM

I agree to allow my child to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Please check the component(s) that you are agreeing to allow your child to participate within:

☐ Lesson Questionnaire ☐ Interview **OR** ☐ All Components

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F

Student Assent Forms



JUNIOR/INTERMEDIATE STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Project Title: Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom

Principal Student Investigator (PI):

Megan Henning (Brock University)

Mh09dg@brocku.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Kimberly Maich (Brock University)

kmaich@brocku.ca

INVITATION

You have been invited to participate in a study that involves research. The reason we are doing this research is to help us understand more about classrooms like yours, and students who have special needs (exceptionalities) in the classroom.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in

- A classroom lesson regarding exceptionalities (20 Minutes)
- Complete a survey regarding your classroom experiences (Approximately 20 minutes).
- Some students will be selected to participate in a brief 10 minute interview where you will be asked to share more about your experiences with your peers in your classroom. These interviews will be recorded using an audio recording application on an iPad.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

Benefits: Understanding more about classrooms and how students play and work together.

Risk: Upon being asked to think about working and playing with your friends, you may recall a time where you perhaps have been unkind or unfriendly which may make you feel upset. However, we want you to know that your information will help us make classrooms more positive for other students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information you provide during this study will be confidential. This means that anything you say or write down will be private. No one will know that it was you who said these responses. The only thing anyone will know is what grade you are in.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. This means you do not have to participate in any part of this study (lesson, questionnaire, or interview). You may also choose to stop participating at any time, and no one will be upset. Please let myself or your teacher know if you want to stop the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about these activities, please feel free to have your parents or classroom teacher contact Megan Henning or Dr. Kimberly Maich.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board [15-222 - MAICH] and has additionally has received approval from the HWCDSB Research Ethics Board.

Thank you for your help!

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study. I know I can ask more questions throughout my participation in this study. I also know that I can withdraw from this study any time.

Please check the component(s) that you are agreeing to participate within:

☐ Lesson ☐ Questionnaire ☐ Interview **OR** ☐ All Components

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____



PRIMARY STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Project Title: Investigating Peer Attitudes towards Students with Exceptionalities in the Classroom

Principal Student Investigator (PI):

Megan Henning (Brock University)

Mh09dg@brocku.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Kimberly Maich (Brock University)

kmaich@brocku.ca

You have been invited to participate in a research study: The reason we are doing this research is to help us understand more about classrooms like yours, and students who have special needs (exceptionalities) in the classroom.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in:

1. A classroom lesson (20 minutes)
2. Complete a survey (Approximately 20 minutes).
3. Some students will be selected to participate in a 10 minute interview. These interviews will be recorded.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

Benefits: Understanding more about classrooms and how students play and work together.

Risk: Upon being asked to think about working and playing with your friends, you may recall a time where you perhaps have been unkind or unfriendly which may make you feel upset. However, we want you to know that your information will help us make classrooms more positive for other students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information you provide during this study will be confidential. This means that anything you say or write down will be private. No one will know that it was you who said these responses. The only thing anyone will know is what grade you are in.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. This means you do not have to participate in any part of this study (lesson, questionnaire, or interview). You may also choose to stop participating at any time, and no one will be upset. Please let myself or your teacher know if you want to stop the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about these activities, please feel free to have your parents or classroom teacher contact Megan Henning or Dr. Kimberly Maich.

Thank you for your help!

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board 15-222 - MAICH] and has additionally has received approval from the HWCDSB Research Ethics Board.

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I understand that I can ask questions or stop participating at any time.

Please check the activities that you are agreeing to participate within:

☐ Lesson ☐ Questionnaire ☐ Interview **OR** ☐ All Components

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G

Mini Lesson

Lesson Plan: Learning with Peers who have Special Needs

Materials Required

- Looking after Louis (2004) book
- What about Owen (2015) e book
- Markers
- Chart Paper
- White Board Markers
- iPhone(*For recording purposes*)
- Collage(*Depicting a variety of children with exceptionalities*)

Introduction:

- Explain to students that I am conducting research.
- Question younger students if they have ever done any research (Prompt: Have you ever asked your friends questions, done a survey, asked them what they liked in order to learn something)?
- Explain that I want to know more about children and youth who have special needs in classrooms. Explain that I think the best way to learn about children and youth in classrooms is to talk to children and youth in classrooms.
- Inform students that I will be audio recording this discussion and brainstorm so that I can refer to it later. Tell students that if they are not comfortable sharing, they are not obligated to share any ideas out loud. We want to make sure that we are respectful of all of our friend's ideas and remember our classroom rules. That means we would like everyone to be encouraging and supportive of everyone's ideas.[Begin Recording]
- Ask students to tell me what you think I mean when I say "special needs". What does this mean to you?
- Tell students that I am curious to know what they already know about children or youth who have special needs. (Prompt: Maybe you know someone from a sport you play, or your family. We don't have to share their names but try to think about what you know about them). I'd like you to consider people you may know outside this school.

- Allow students to share their ideas with a partner before contributing them to the larger group.
- Write student ideas on the chart paper or white board.

Story Book:

- Thank students for participating in the brainstorm.
- Explain that you want to share a couple of stories about some students who have special needs. Talk about how the students in the book are in a classroom very similar to theirs.
- Read the story out loud
- Ask students “How did the students in the class respond to Louis and Owen? What did they think about having Louis or Owen in their class?”
- Explain that throughout the story, these children were interacting with another student who has a special need. Ask students to consider “Are all students with special needs like Louis or Owen?” “What are some other types of special needs that you know of?”
- Share collage of students with special needs and then continue discussion **[End Recording]**

Questionnaire:

- Explain to students that you want to hear more about their thoughts and are going to ask them to complete an anonymous questionnaire
- Refer to Appendix E for verbal script to read before distributing the questionnaire.
- Thank students for their time.

Appendix H

Sample Verbal Script

Introduction

I would like to ask you to be as honest as possible when completing the questionnaire and if you have any questions throughout, please feel free to ask me. The only things I'd like you to write are what grade you are in and your name. As you can see, both your name and grade will be removed at a later date so that your responses remain confidential. Remember, this means that no one will know what you said. All of your answers are private and therefore will not be shared with your parents, teachers, or your peers. I will read all of the questions out loud and all you have to do is circle your response. If there are any questions you do not understand, please feel free to ask me what they mean. If anyone no longer wants to participate, simply turn over the questionnaire when you receive it. You do not have to participate. If you do not want to answer a question, you can simply leave it blank and wait until we move on to the next one. I'd also like to remind you that you do not have to complete the questionnaire and can stop at any time if you no longer wish to answer the questions. When you are done, you can place your questionnaire in the box."

- Distribute questionnaires.
- "Thank you very much for your time. Enjoy the rest of your day at school."

Appendix I

Questionnaire

Name: _____ Grade: _____

Assigned Number: _____

Part 1: Overall Attitudes

Have you ever worked or played with someone who has a special need? (Circle one).

Yes No

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I enjoy (would enjoy) playing with my peers who have special needs	1	2	3	4	5
2	I enjoy (would enjoy) working with my peers who have special needs.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Students who have special needs are mostly friendly.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Students with special needs often share similar interests with me.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I have felt frustrated when playing with a peer who has a special need.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I have felt annoyed by a peer who has a special need.	1	2	3	4	5

7.	If a student who has a special need wanted to play or work with me, I would say yes.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I might feel uncomfortable if a student who has a special need sat near me.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I would start a conversation with a student who has a special need.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I have friends who have special needs.	1	2	3	4	5

Part 2: How do you feel (or how do you think you would feel) when working or playing with students who have special needs?

		Never	Sometimes	Most of the Time	Always
11.	Happy	1	2	3	4
12.	Stressed	1	2	3	4
13.	Relaxed	1	2	3	4
14.	Indifference	1	2	3	4
15.	Interested	1	2	3	4
16.	Friendly	1	2	3	4
17.	Nervous	1	2	3	4
18.	Helpful	1	2	3	4

Appendix J

Questionnaire Development Resources

Survey and Interview Questions: Adaptation List			Original Question	Adapted From:
SQ_P1_Q1	Have you ever worked or played with someone who has a special need?	Yes/No	Have you met a person with a disability?	(Hong et al., 2014).
SQ_P1_Q2	I enjoy (would enjoy) playing with my special needs.	Rating Scale	Self-developed	
SQ_P1_Q3	I enjoy (would enjoy) working with my peers who have special needs.	Rating Scale	Self-developed	
SQ_P1_Q4	Students who have special needs are mostly friendly.	Rating Scale	"[They] look friendly"	Multidimensional Attitudes Scale Toward Persons with Disabilities (MAS) cognition subscale (Findler, Vilchinsky, & Werner (2007)).
SQ_P1_Q5	Students with special needs often share similar interests with me.	Rating Scale	"I can always talk with [them] about things that interest us both	MAS cognition subscale (Findler et al., 2007).
SQ_P1_Q6	I have felt frustrated when playing with a peer who has a special need.	Rating Scale	None. Based on findings from Cairns and McClatchey (2013) and Cameron (2014) stating students have conveyed these feelings	(Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Cameron, 2014).
SQ_P1_Q7	I have felt annoyed by a peer who has a special need.	Rating Scale	None. Based on findings from Cairns and McClatchey (2013) and Cameron (2014) stating students have conveyed these feelings	(Cairns & McClatchey, 2013; Cameron, 2014).
SQ_P1_Q8	If a student who has a special need wanted to play or work with me, I would say yes.	Rating Scale	"[They] are in a wheelchair because [they] cannot walk. [They] want to play with you. What would you say to them?"	(Hong, Kwon, & Jeon 2014).
SQ_P1_Q9	I would start a conversation with a student who has a special need.	Rating Scale	"Start a conversation "	MAS behaviour subscale (Findler et al., 2007).
SQ_P1_Q10	I would want to move if a student with a special need were near me.	Rating Scale	"Get up and leave"	MAS behaviour subscale (avoidance/escape behaviour) (Findler et al., 2007).
SQ_P1_Q10	I have friends who have special needs.	Rating Scale	Self-developed	

SQ_P2	How do you (or how would you feel) when working or playing with students who have special needs?		MAS list of emotions from the circumplex model of affect. (Original list includes 16 emotions ranging from those with positive to those with negative notations)	(Findler et al., 2007).
SQ_P2_Q1	Stressed	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q2	Nervous	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q3	Relaxed	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q4	Fearful	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q5	Pity	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q6	Disgusted	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q7	Helpful	Rating Scale		
SQ_P2_Q8	Happy	Rating Scale		
IQ_Q1	Tell me about someone that you know who has a special need.	Open Ended	Tell me everything you know about a person who has a disability.	(Hong et al., 2014)
IQ_Q2	Let's pretend that we are in a classroom and there is a student with a special need. If they needed help, how could you help them?	Open Ended	[Following a video of children with various needs] Are there ways that you could help the child?	(Cairns & McClatchey, 2013)
IQ_Q3 IQ_Q3_SQ1	Are you friends with anyone who has a special need? Sub Question: Tell me about a great experience you have had with them.	Yes/No Open Ended	 Tell me about some of your experiences with these kids. What do/did you do together?	(Litvak, Ritchie, & Shore, 2011)
IQ_Q4	Tell me about a time where something hasn't been great when you have worked or played with someone who has a special need. <i>Prompt: Has it ever been challenging to work or play with someone who has a special need? In what ways could it be challenging?</i>	Open Ended	What are the challenges/ hard parts of having children with disabilities in your class?	(Litvak et al., 2011)
IQ_Q5	What would it be like to have students with special needs in your classroom?	Open Ended	[Following a video of children with various needs] What would it be like to have the child in	(Cairns & McClatchey, 2013)

IQ_Q5_SQ1	Sub Question: Why is it important to include everyone in your class?	Open Ended	your classroom? What does 'inclusion' mean?/ Reasons for allowing children who use wheelchairs into the classroom	(Hodkinson, 2007)
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Appendix K

Interview Protocol

Introduction

“My name is _____. I’m visiting from Brock University and am here to conduct some research. Have you ever conducted research? Asked your friends questions to try and learn information? I’m hoping that we can use the information from my research to help make classrooms better learning environments for everyone. I’m going to be recording our interview on this recorder so that I can listen to it again later. I’m not going to share your names or any of your personal information with anyone including your teacher. The only thing that will be reported is what grade you are in.

I’m going to ask you a few questions now and you can try to answer them the best you can. If you don’t want to answer a question, please let me know and we can skip it.”

Interviewer Name: _____ Time: _____ Date: _____

Audio File Number: _____

Question Outline:

- Tell me about someone that you know who has a special need.
 - If no one is indicated – Prompt: Can you think of anyone from a movie or TV show that has a special need? What about from our story? What is he or she like?
- Let’s pretend that we are in a classroom and there is a student with a special need. If he or she needed help, how could you help him or her?
- Are you friends with anyone who has a special need?
 - If Yes - Sub Question: Tell me about a great experience you have had with him or her.
 - If No – What do you think it would be like to play with a child who has a special need?
- Do you participate in any school clubs or on any sports teams?
 - If Yes – What would it be like to have a child with a special need in that club or on that team?
 - If No – Can you think of a sport you really like to play? What would it be like to play that sport with a child who had a special need?
- Why is it important to include all of your friends in your classroom or on your teams?

When complete: Thank you for sharing your ideas. We appreciate your input. I would just like to remind you that we are asking that you do not share any information when you leave the interview room as we want to maintain privacy.